

**Christian Perfection in Wesley and Fletcher with  
Implications for today**

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## Abstract

Christian Perfection is most often dismissed or defended on the basis, declared or assumed, that it is 'perfect sanctification' or 'sinless perfection'. For those who dismiss the concept not least in their considerations is John Wesley's own insistence in retaining the word 'perfection' and his apparent ambivalence with regard to 'sinlessness'. In the case of those who defend the idea there continues to be, underlying all of the qualifications, an acceptance that Christian Perfection is indeed 'perfect sanctification', albeit an imperfect 'perfect sanctification'. It is the contention of this study that Christian Perfection defined in such terms as 'perfect sanctification', imperfect or otherwise, is an inadequate definition of the idea and does a serious injustice to what Wesley intended.

Bringing together Wesley and his first interpreter, John Fletcher, the first two chapters of the study seek to present how both men perceived their understanding of the concept, based on what they considered to be the definitive documents on Christian Perfection. With regard to Wesley's understanding of the concept the dissertation maintains that not enough attention has been paid to Wesley's final summary in the *Plain Account* where he describes Christian Perfection in its 'native' form. On the foundation of the first two chapters, the third chapter attempts to compare the two men's understanding in relation to the similarities, differences and the countering of criticisms. It concludes that Wesley and Fletcher saw themselves as basically in agreement and that after Fletcher's own adjustment, his emphasis on the Spirit, whatever the subsequent interpretation of history, should be seen as complementing and not contradicting Wesley. With chapter 4 the major problems of Christian Perfection in terms of definition, time and experience are examined in the light of biblical and theological perspectives. In the penultimate chapter it is argued that the key to understanding Christian Perfection is to see it, not in terms of sanctification, instantaneous or progressive, but as the Wesley/Fletcher 'category of interpretation' for the wholeness of vibrant Christian living. As such this holds together the pastoral need for 'actualisation' with the ongoing dynamic of life in the Spirit. The final chapter seeks to work out some of the implications of such an understanding paying particular attention to the religio- political dimensions of the current situation in Northern Ireland.



## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

John Wesley first published *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in the year 1766. In the subsequent years, 1767 - 1777, he considered the concept to be of such importance that he published four more editions.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, 1767 was the year in which he believed that Conference would determine 'whether all our preachers or none shall continually insist on *Christian Perfection*'.<sup>2</sup> However, some 230 years later the confusion and uncertainty which had apparently surrounded the concept still remains. All of Wesley's effort in attempting to make the concept 'plain' has seemingly ended in failure, the idea still continuing to be anything but plain for many. From Wesley's time to the present it has most often been argued that Wesley was preaching nothing less than 'sinless perfection' or 'perfect sanctification', albeit with qualifications. Even someone as obviously sympathetic to the concept as W.E. Sangster has stated:

"Certainly anyone who has collected all of (Wesley's) references on the point in sermons, Journals, letters and pamphlets would have to say that on Wesley's definitions of 'sin' and 'perfection' he is fully committed to the phrase 'sinless perfection'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Jurgen Moltmann, who it might be argued could be more objective than Sangster, standing as he does outside of Methodism and with the benefit of the intervening years of subsequent scholarship, has stated:

"The expression 'sinless perfection' is often used in books and essays about Wesley but he himself rejected the term."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Williams, C.W., *John Wesley's Theology*, [Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1960], p.172

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Mary Bosanquet, later to become the wife of John Fletcher. Telford, J., (ed) *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, [London: Epworth Press, 1931, 8 Volumes], Vol. V, p. 61 [Hereafter cited as *Letters*]

<sup>3</sup> Sangster, W.E., *The Path to Perfection* [London: Epworth Press 1943], p. 81. Of course Sangster does qualify this by saying "...if the terms be chiselled to mean what he meant by them, the phrase stands." But this begs the question.

<sup>4</sup> Moltmann, J., *The Spirit of Life: A universal affirmation* [London: S.C.M., 1992 Translation Margaret Khol], p.165. Interestingly Moltmann understands Wesley as seeing 'perfect love' as a final goal rather than an achievable experience though he would allow that sanctification for Wesley was more than a 'hope' and more than a 'beginning', p. 332 n 11.

With such confusion many have argued that the concept is nothing more than the product of a muddled mind<sup>5</sup> and that it has long since been totally discredited. Even those who are John Wesley's successors are embarrassed by it. At best, the notion has been so hedged around with qualifications that it can appear to be nothing more than a rather nebulous ideal. At worst, it has been pushed into rigid doctrinal forms in order to justify the existence of yet another Christian grouping. Wesley was keenly aware of the controversy which the concept had created and given his intellectual stature he must also have been aware of the problems inherent in it.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, he went on defending the concept, seeking to clarify its meaning and declaring it to be the divine reason for the existence of Methodism.<sup>7</sup> While this might be dismissed simply in terms of a theological blindness on the part of Wesley, or indeed maybe even in terms of a stubborn refusal to admit that he was wrong, the fact that the concept still continues to exercise minds suggests there may be something more.<sup>8</sup> For the present writer neither the 'vision of a goal' nor an attenuated view of 'perfect sanctification' described in terms of 'entire sanctification' give a satisfactory solution to the problem. It seems to him that the former approach would be better served by abandoning the concept all together

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<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Jones, D. M., *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987], p. 10

<sup>6</sup> The sense of inner turmoil is seen in two letters written to his brother Charles in 1768. In one he writes: "I am at my wits end with regard to two things - the Church and Christian Perfection." Letters Vol. 5 :88. He writes in the other: " Shall we go on in asserting perfection against all the world? Or shall we quietly let it drop? " Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter (15 September 1790) written near the end of his life Wesley states: "This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appears to have raised us up." Letters, Vol. VIII, p. 238

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, such annotated bibliographies as: Baker, F., *Unfolding John Wesley: A Survey of Twenty Years Studies in Wesley's Thought*, *Quarterly Review*, No. 1, 1980 pp. 44-58; Field C. D., *Bibliography of Methodist Historical Literature*, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, (supplement published annually); Melton, J. G., *An Annotated Bibliography of Publications about the Life and Work of John Wesley*, *Methodist History*, No. 7, July 1969, pp. 29 -46; Norwood F. A., *Methodist Historical Studies, 1930 -1959*, *Church History*, No. 28, December 1959, pp. 391-417

while the latter owes less to Wesley and more to the 19th century Wesleyan movement in America.<sup>9</sup> But if neither of these understandings give an adequate solution to the concept of *Christian Perfection*, what did Wesley intend by the term? As Joxer, a particularly unsavoury character in a play written by Sean O'Casey, says, 'That's the question.'<sup>10</sup> It is a question which has continued to puzzle the present writer over the years, a puzzle kept alive by a number of factors and eventually resulting in this research.

As a Methodist minister each Spring Synod in line with the discipline of the Church he is obligated to answer the following questions:

- "1. Do you believe and preach our doctrines?
2. Are you in debt?
3. Have you duly observed and enforced our discipline?"<sup>11</sup>

The standards of 'preaching and belief'<sup>12</sup> for all of Mr Wesley's preachers remain Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* and the first four volumes of his sermons, therefore the affirmation required by the first question must include *Christian Perfection*. If there was any doubt of this, the Constitution makes it quite explicit when it continues to declare the *raison d'être* for the existence of Methodism:

"The Methodist Church... ever remembers that, in the Providence of God, Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith, and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission."<sup>13</sup>

While a response in the affirmative in the mind of any individual minister might be qualified by interpretation, this at the very least raises the question of which interpretation, not to mention the matter of integrity. It is true that

<sup>9</sup> Outler, J., *John Wesley*, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1964], p. 31

<sup>10</sup> O'Casey, S., (Moffatt, S., ed.), *Juno and the Paycock*, [Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988], p. 74

<sup>11</sup> *Manual of the Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church in Ireland*, [Belfast: Methodist Conference, 1976], p. 349 [Hereafter *Manual of Laws*]

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



with regard to questions on interpretation of doctrine, Conference is always the final authority in the Methodist Church.<sup>14</sup> However, the most recent attempt by the Irish Conference to define *Christian Perfection*, in the opinion of this writer, leaves a lot to be desired. Under the distinctive emphases of Methodism, known as the 'Four Alls'<sup>15</sup> or the 'Epworth Quadrilateral', the emphasis of the fourth, 'All may be completely saved', is described as follows:

"John Wesley regarded this doctrine as the reason for Methodism's existence. Being saved completely means being made perfect in love.

We recognise the possibility that we may yield to temptation and become what Wesley called 'backsliders'. Faith should mark every moment of life. Without it the child of God can become a prodigal. But none need be so lost that he/she cannot be restored. Restoration like the original conversion is brought about by God's grace received in faith."<sup>16</sup>

If the sentence containing the words 'perfect love' was removed the reader would be entitled to ask, 'what is so distinctive about being completely saved?' On the other hand, if the sentence remains, he or she must still wonder, what is perfect love? Of course, another way of dealing with the matter is to reduce the 'Epworth Quadrilateral' to the 'Epworth Triangle'.<sup>17</sup> Here the thrust of Christian Perfection is expressed in the belief that there is no limit to what God can do with a person who, without reserve, places himself or herself in His hands. This has merit in that Wesley did indeed want to stress the limitless grace of God but in the context of *Christian*

<sup>14</sup> *Manual of Laws*, p. 17

<sup>15</sup> The 'Four Alls' are: 1. All men and women need to be saved. 2. All men and women can be saved. 3. All men and women can know they are saved. 4. All men and women can be saved to the uttermost.

<sup>16</sup> Statement on Methodist Belief presented by The Faith and Order Committee to the Conference at Londonderry in 1989. *Reports and Agenda*, [Methodist Conference, Londonderry, 1989], C 4 p. 72

<sup>17</sup> The Epworth Triangle is: 1. The priority of God's universal love. 2. The need for a personal faith. 3. No limitations can be put to God's grace in its effect on humanity given the limitations of living in a body in a fallen world. Turner, J. M., *Introducing Theology*, [London: Epworth Press, 1975], pp. 78 - 85

*Perfection* it begs the question as to whether or not there is limit for fallen creatures living in a fallen world. Furthermore, if this was all that *Christian Perfection* was intended to express it would seem better if, as Wesley himself once indicated, the concept should just be dropped.<sup>18</sup> But, now, as then, there has been a definite reluctance to let go of the concept, however tenuous the hold. So, for example, Dr R. D. E. Gallagher, a former Secretary and also a past President of The Methodist Church in Ireland, strongly maintains that the concept of *Christian Perfection* must not be lost, for if properly understood and presented, it provides the Methodist Church with an effective tool for the promotion of inward spiritual growth as well as outward social righteousness. While clearly recognising the difficulties of the concept, Gallagher maintains that:

“if we could find a succinct and acceptable form of words to describe what Wesley was getting at, a form of words understandable in the modern context, I think we would have a very relevant gospel.”<sup>19</sup>

These sentiments are not restricted to Irish Methodism.<sup>20</sup>

However, if the concept of *Christian Perfection* is indeed to be retained with integrity, what form of words is going to be adequate to express the seemingly important reality in the notion? Certainly, given the amount of attention the concept has received and the fact that there is still confusion and uncertainty some 230<sup>21</sup> years later, it might be argued there is not much hope of finding such a form of words. Indeed, it might well be considered arrogant and even foolish to attempt yet again a research project on the concept. But, of course, research only works on the belief that ‘there is

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<sup>18</sup> See above, p. 2 footnote 7

<sup>19</sup> Gallagher, R.D.E., In an interview with the writer, 14 September 1993.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Beck, Chapter 5: *Christian Perfection - A solution offered*, p.191

<sup>21</sup> If the date of the publication of the first edition of the *Plain Account* (1767) is taken as a reference point.

almost always something fresh to say even about well-worn subjects'.<sup>22</sup>

Alongside the present writer's own personal involvement as a Methodist minister, two statements on the concept from outside of Methodism have also been significant in encouraging the idea that there might yet be something more in Wesley's *Christian Perfection* to be discovered. The first is from R. W. Dale (1829-95), a distinguished minister of Carr's Lane, Congregational Church, Birmingham, who stated:

"There was one doctrine of John Wesley's - the doctrine of perfect sanctification - which ought to have led to a great and original ethical development; but the doctrine has not grown; it seems to remain where John Wesley left it. There has been a great want of genius or the courage to attempt the immense practical questions which the doctrine suggests. The questions have not been raised - much less solved. To have raised them effectively, indeed, would have been to originate an ethical revolution which would have had a far deeper effect on the thought and life - first of England, and then of the rest of Christendom - than was produced by the reformation of the sixteenth century."<sup>23</sup>

While Dale does not elaborate any further on what is recorded above his statement has stimulated the present writer, not only as an important part of the initial impetus in the enquiry but, also, as an ongoing stimulus in the project when zeal was flagging. The second statement was made by Kenneth Leech, someone said to 'represent the generous, intelligent and genuinely Catholic side of Anglo-Catholicism'.<sup>24</sup> According to Leech:

"The potential of, and the problem for the Wesleyan tradition lies in the link between personal sanctification and the transformation of society...Whatever happens to World Methodism it is clear that the Wesleyan tradition, with its concern for perfection, its insistence on social holiness and its roots among the common people, could make a major contribution to the renewal of

<sup>22</sup> Rack, H. D., Personal correspondence, 23 October 1990.

<sup>23</sup> Dale, R. W., *The Evangelical Revival and Other Sermons*, [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1880], p. 39

<sup>24</sup> Leech is so described in a review of his most recent book, *The Sky is Red: Discerning the signs of the signs*, [Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997], by Gorringer, T. G., *I told you so*, *The Expository Times*, Vol. 109 No. 2, p. 62.



spirituality in the last part of the 20th Century.”<sup>25</sup>

This statement, coming as it does some 100 years later than that by Dale, in the opinion of the present writer is confirmation of the significance of Dale’s statement and therefore should strengthen the resolve to find what possible hidden wealth there still might be in Wesley’s concept of *Christian Perfection*. While the present writer would want to clarify Leech’s focus on personal sanctification by shifting it to a much broader understanding, the recognition that in the concept of *Christian Perfection* there is a valuable resource for the renewal of spirituality seems to him a highly significant factor.

With the possibility raised of a connection between *Christian Perfection* and a transformation in society, the present writer began to think about the likely implications for Northern Ireland, in particular with regard to the religious and political dimensions of the current situation. If *Christian Perfection* were indeed to offer a resource which could help the individual believer more fully to realise ‘Christian authenticity within the form of his/her own culture’<sup>26</sup> then it had to be worth consideration. Given the desire of the the Methodist Church in Ireland to be the ‘friends of all and enemies of none’ it might be well placed amongst the denominations to offer the insights contained in *Christian Perfection* to the wider community. This need not suggest that such was the only way or that the Methodists had a monopoly on truth. Methodism does not see itself as a sectarian movement but as part of ‘the Holy Catholic Church, which is the body of Christ’.<sup>27</sup> As such it continues to claim it has a mission in the world in partnership with the rest of the body.<sup>28</sup> If it acts in accordance with its declared beliefs and the original intention for

<sup>25</sup> Leech, K., *The Eye of the Storm*, [Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992], p. 42

<sup>26</sup> Schillebeeckx, E., *God and the Future of Man*, [London: Sheed and Ward, 1969 ], p.187

<sup>27</sup> *Manual of Laws*, p. 16

<sup>28</sup> *Mission Statement, Minutes of Conference*, Dublin 1993, p. 38 point 5

which it was conceived, then a major part of this mission must be to encourage the Church universal to become a place for creating and sustaining 'Scriptural Holiness'.<sup>29</sup> To the present writer there seems no greater test as to the reality and viability of such a mission than the Irish situation.

Another factor stimulating the research has been the growth of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement with its corresponding impact on the world of Christendom and beyond. From obscure beginnings, a little under 100 hundred years ago, the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement has grown to an estimated 21 percent of organised Christianity.<sup>30</sup> Such has been its impact, within the Church universal and outside of it, that the movement has been referred to as 'a third force in Christendom'.<sup>31</sup> There can be no doubt that it deserves to be heard, indeed it might be argued it cannot be ignored, in relation to its teaching and practice. However, for the present writer, given that both the Methodist and the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements share a theology which emphasises some kind of post-conversion blessing, it has been puzzling to see the former movement's failure in utilising its theological heritage, despite calls to do so, while the latter movement unashamedly attributes its success to this apparently similar emphasis. Of course, Wesleyan scholars have debated whether the Pentecostal/Charismatic term 'the baptism in/with the Holy Spirit' is the most appropriate understanding for the crisis of 'entire sanctification'.<sup>32</sup> The

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<sup>29</sup> See: Rack. H., *The Future of John Wesley's Methodism*, [London: Lutterworth Press, 1965] Scriptural Holiness is the one term that the present writer would accept is interchangeable with Christian Perfection.

<sup>30</sup> Barrett, D. B., *Statistics, Global*, in Burgess, S. M., McGee, G. B., (eds), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1988], pp. 810 - 830; see also Land, S. J., *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*, [Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993].

<sup>31</sup> Dunn, J. D. G., *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, [London: S.C.M., 1970], p. 2

<sup>32</sup> Certainly by the end of the 19th century the crisis of 'entire sanctification' was generally associated with the 'baptism with the Holy Spirit'.

response has been varied.<sup>33</sup> At the heart of the debate has been the argument as to whether John Fletcher's use of Pentecostal language was appropriate for Wesley's concept of *Christian Perfection*, thus equating what happens in 'entire sanctification' with the 'baptism in/with the Holy Spirit'.<sup>34</sup> The question for this research is whether this is indeed the correct focus. Sanctification is still at the centre of the concept. Perhaps the focus on the crisis of sanctification should be widened to take in the insights of the Pentecostal language. Then, maybe, a more holistic view of what Wesley and Fletcher intended to portray by the concept of *Christian Perfection* might emerge.

Against this background therefore, the present writer seeks firstly to present Christian Perfection as it has been defined by Wesley and Fletcher themselves. Fletcher must be included because Wesley himself regarded his contribution to the concept of Christian Perfection as extremely important. As later thought has stated, Fletcher's work was the first formal systematic presentation of Wesley's doctrine of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>35</sup> Any study of the concept therefore must pay close attention to Fletcher's contribution. Of course, as indicated above, his presentation is particularly important in relation to any perceived shift of understanding in *Christian Perfection* caused by his use of what has been called 'Pentecostal language'.<sup>36</sup> The description of *Christian Perfection* is based primarily on *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* by Wesley and on three documents from Fletcher, *The Last Check to Antinomianism*, *An Essay on Truth* and

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<sup>33</sup> Dieter gives a brief outline of the issues in *Five Views on Sanctification*, [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie, 1987], pp. 42 - 46

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed view of this debate see: *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, No. 14, Spring and Fall 1979

<sup>35</sup> Smith, T. L., *How John Fletcher became the theologian of Wesleyan Perfectionism*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, No. 15, Spring 1980, pp. 68 - 87

<sup>36</sup> Wood, L. W., *Pentecostal Grace*, [Wilmore, Kentucky: Francis Asbury Publishing, 1980]

*The New Birth*. While other sources are used, as in Sermons, Letters and Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament*, it is the belief of the present writer that in these four documents Wesley and Fletcher intended a definitive description of *Christian Perfection* should emerge. It is on this basis therefore that chapter 3 of the thesis attempts to compare Wesley and Fletcher in their understanding of Christian Perfection. The similarities are considered and any hint of disagreement is explored. In the following two chapters the major problems of the concept are examined and a solution is offered. The problems in defining 'sin' and 'perfection', the difficulties of a moment of crisis in terms of time and experience are all considered in the light of biblical and theological perspectives. The solution offered is one which attempts to move the focus of *Christian Perfection* from a singular emphasis on sanctification to one of a more inclusive emphasis of life in the Spirit. Wesley and Fletcher believed Scriptural Christianity to be one empowered by the Spirit yet both men were convinced that many Christians were not experiencing such apparent potential. *Christian Perfection* therefore offered a 'category of interpretation' which encapsulated the Wesley/Fletcher understanding of all that it meant to live in the Spirit and experience whole Christianity. Taking the idea that *Christian Perfection* is nothing other than the Wesley/Fletcher understanding of whole Christianity, the final chapter seeks to demonstrate how such a resource might be utilised in the life of believers individually and corporately and also how it might affect the wider community and environment. The present writer had a particular concern for its ramifications within the current religio-political situation in Northern Ireland.

## Chapter 1 Christian Perfection - Wesley's explanation

### Introduction

The classic treatment of *Christian Perfection* is of course Wesley's essay called *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.<sup>1</sup> The concept of *Christian Perfection* had been the target of great antagonism and debate. Wesley had been charged with inconsistency, contradiction and confusion in relation to it. The *Plain Account*, therefore, was Wesley's attempt to set the record straight once and for all. He claimed that this essay contained all he had 'believed and taught' about *Christian Perfection* 'for these forty years, from the year 1725 to the year 1765'.<sup>2</sup>

In the main, the essay, which must be his most important single essay, is not original but rather a bringing together, albeit with textual exposition, of various of his writings on the theme of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>3</sup> Wesley, no doubt, wanted the essay to be seen as a presentation of his mature understanding on the subject, an understanding which he maintained had not in essence changed for four decades. Outler maintains that the *Plain Account* contains everything of real importance that Wesley ever said on the subject of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>4</sup> Certainly it would be fair to say, that at the very least, Wesley intended the essay to be seen in such a light. In its fourth edition<sup>5</sup> it was included by Wesley in the *Discipline* of 1789 without further

<sup>1</sup> Wesley J., *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, [London: Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room, n.d.], Vol. XI. [Hereafter cited as *Wesley's Works*]

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.444

<sup>3</sup> It has been described as a 'scissors and paste' job with some new material in the shape of textual exposition.

<sup>4</sup> Whaling, F., *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Writings and Hymns*. [New York: Paulist Press, 1981] p. xv

<sup>5</sup> The four editions were issued between the years 1767 and 1777. see Williams, C.W., *John Wesley's Theology Today*, p.172



revision<sup>6</sup> confirming the idea that it was to be regarded as the official understanding of *Christian Perfection*.

Of course the title, *Plain Account*, could be misleading if the reader is seeking for a simple explanation of what *Christian Perfection* is. Wesley does not begin with any clear definition. Indeed it is not until the conclusion of the essay that the clearest definition of what is intended by the term *Christian Perfection* can be found.<sup>7</sup> It is true that Wesley did give a summary earlier in the essay, one which has been interpreted by some as a 'succinct presentation of the doctrine'.<sup>8</sup> In it Wesley stated that:

"A. There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in scripture.

B. It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to go on to perfection. (Hebrews 6 : 1)

C. It is not so late as death, for Saint Paul speaks of living men that were perfect. (Philippians 3 : 15)

D. It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone.

E. It does not make a man infallible: none is infallible, while he remains in the body.

F. Is it sinless? It is not worthwhile to contend for a term. It is salvation from sin.

G. It is perfect love. (1 John 4 : 18) This is the essence of it : its properties, or inseparable fruits, are rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks. (1 Thessalonians 5 : 16 ff.)

H. It is improvable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.

I. It is amissible, capable of being lost, of which we have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this 'till five or six years ago.

J. It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.

K. But is it in itself instantaneous, or not? In examining this, let us go step by step..."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Peters, J.L., *Christian Perfection and American Methodism*, [Nashville: Abingdon, 1956], p. 32. [Hereafter cited as Peters]

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that other definitions cannot be found throughout the *Plain Account*. But such definitions are not identified by Wesley as defining *Christian Perfection* in its 'native' form.

<sup>8</sup> Peters, p.33

<sup>9</sup> *Wesley's Works*, pp. 441-443

However, in the opinion of the present writer this summary does not give the clearest presentation of the concept for *Christian Perfection* still remains an 'it'. Only in the final conclusion when Wesley describes *Christian Perfection* in its 'native' form is there a clear explanation of the term.<sup>10</sup> There he stated that *Christian Perfection* is:

- (i) Loving God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves.
- (ii) Renewal in heart, not only in part, but in the whole image of God.
- (iii) Being cleansed from all pollution both of flesh and spirit.
- (iv) Having all the mind of Christ and walking as He walked.
- (v) Devoting soul, body, and substance, not in part, but all to God.
- (vi) Giving God all our heart with one design ruling all our tempers.

According to Wesley whether these differing aspects are taken singly or collectively they present perfection 'in its own shape'.<sup>11</sup>

The purpose of this first chapter then will be to set out *Christian Perfection* as Wesley presented it, in its 'native' form.

### **Perfection in its own shape**

The six aspects will be summarised and viewed in light of the rest of the essay.

#### **Loving God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves**

According to Wesley there was,

"... nothing higher or lower than this,—The pure love of God and man; the loving God with all our heart and soul, and our neighbour as ourselves..."<sup>12</sup>

This was the royal law of heaven and earth, the *summum bonum* of living in time and eternity.<sup>13</sup> How could anyone who calls himself or herself a

<sup>10</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 444 f.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 445

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368

Christian object to such a standard so obviously laid down in the scripture?

In the Old Testament the command was:

“...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”<sup>14</sup>

In the New Testament had not Jesus reduced all the commandments to this when he said,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.....You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”<sup>15</sup>

By keeping to what he perceived as such a scriptural understanding<sup>16</sup> Wesley argued that false notions of perfection would be avoided and a standard for *Christian Perfection* would be set that was neither too high nor too low.<sup>17</sup> He contended that whatever was scriptural must not be impossible to reach.<sup>18</sup> He therefore declared:

“Is there a thing beneath the sun  
That strives with thee my heart to share?  
Ah tear it thence, and reign alone.  
The Lord of every motion there!”<sup>19</sup>

### **Renewal in heart, not only in part, but in the whole image of God**

Seen in this light *Christian Perfection* belongs to the great process of renewal of the distorted image of God in the human person. Wesley stated:

“This great gift of God, the salvation of our souls, is no other than the image of God stamped fresh on our hearts.”<sup>20</sup>

He understood the scriptures to teach that the Christian is to be renewed in the spirit of his or her mind after the likeness of the One who had created it;

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 6: 5., see: **Wesley's Works**, p. 387

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 22 : 37, 39. see: *Ibid.*, p. 390.

<sup>16</sup> **Wesley's Works**, p. 401

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409 [7]

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369. Hymn: *Thou hidden love of God* [**Methodist Hymn Book**, London: Methodist Publishing House, 1933] 433, v. 3b. [Hereafter cited as **M.H.B.**]

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378



that is, in 'righteousness and true holiness'.<sup>21</sup> According to Wesley sometime after conversion God begins to disclose to individuals the hidden depths of sin in their own hearts. They begin to realise how far short they fall of this goal of holiness<sup>22</sup> and how utterly helpless they are in themselves to reach it. Clearly convinced, then, of the presence of inbred sin and actively involved in its gradual mortification<sup>23</sup> they are driven by an inexpressible hunger for a full renewal in God's own image.<sup>24</sup> With the words of Charles Wesley they say:

"Heavenly Adam, life divine,  
Change my nature into thine:  
Move and spread throughout my soul,  
Actuate and fill the whole."<sup>25</sup>

The bliss thou hast for me prepared,  
No longer be delay'd:  
Come, my exceeding great reward,  
For whom I first was made."<sup>26</sup>

Such strong desire, Wesley believed, would ultimately be met by God stamping upon them his own image and superscription and coming to dwell as the trinity in their souls.<sup>27</sup> This, however, would not mean that they had arrived and were 'in this sense perfect'.<sup>28</sup> The Spirit would continue to be involved in a 'daily' transformation into the image of the Lord<sup>29</sup> as in 'one degree of glory to another'.<sup>30</sup> But this on-going transformation must not be seen in terms of being a change from weakness to strength or from bondage to liberty but rather as being from 'strength to strength'.

<sup>21</sup> *Wesley's Works*, pp. 378., 387. This is a direct quotation from Ephesians 4 : 23 f.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401 f.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370. Hymn: *Since the Son hath made me free* [*M.H.B.* 568, v3.]

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381. There seems to be an allusion here to John 14 : 23., compare also Ephesians 3 : 16 - 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> 2 Corinthians 3 : 18

## Being cleansed from all pollution both of flesh and spirit

With the whole image of God restored in the soul Wesley understood this to mean that there would be 'a total death to sin.'<sup>31</sup> He believed the Bible affirmed that the Christian would be saved from all sin. Wesley quoted from the 1742 preface to yet another volume of hymns:

"To declare this a little more particularly: We understand by that scriptural expression, a perfect man, one in whom God has fulfilled his faithful word, from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you. *I will also save you from all your uncleannesses.* We understand hereby one whom God has sanctified throughout, in body, soul, and spirit; one who walks in the light as he is in the light, in whom is no darkness at all: the blood of Jesus having cleansed him from all sin."<sup>32</sup>

He felt that no promise could be more clear in its expectation of salvation from all sin<sup>33</sup> than this reference (italicised above) from the Prophet Ezekiel.<sup>34</sup> It was this promise to which Paul referred when he urged the Corinthians to cleanse themselves 'from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God'.<sup>35</sup> The same idea was expressed equally clearly in the ancient promise regarding circumcision of the heart,<sup>36</sup> something which the scriptures referred to as holiness.<sup>37</sup> Such a prospect was held out in the plainest terms throughout the New Testament itself in the form of promises, commands and prayers.<sup>38</sup> It was inconceivable to Wesley that God could command of the Christian more than he had promised<sup>39</sup> so he encouraged the longings expressed again by Charles in verse:

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<sup>31</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 401

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389

<sup>34</sup> Ezekiel 36 : 25, 29

<sup>35</sup> 2 Corinthians 7 : 1

<sup>36</sup> Deuteronomy 30 : 6

<sup>37</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 367

<sup>38</sup> 1 John 3 : 8; Ephesians 5 : 25-27; Romans 8 : 3-4; Matthew 6 : 13; John 17 : 20-21, 23; Ephesians 3 : 14 f f.; 1 Thessalonians 5 : 23; Matthew 5 : 48; 22 : 37

<sup>39</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 408 [3]

“ .....  
 Cleanse me from ev'ry evil thought,  
 From all the filth of self and pride.”<sup>40</sup>

“The hatred of the carnal mind  
 Out of my flesh at once remove!”<sup>41</sup>

“ .....  
 O that I now from sin releas'd,  
 Thy word might to the utmost prove:  
 .....”<sup>42</sup>

### **Having all the mind of Christ and walking as He walked**

If ever there was a biblical model of pure religion as far as Wesley was concerned this was it. The essential for every Christian was:

“...having the mind which was in Christ, and of walking as Christ also walked, even of having, not some part only, but all the mind which was in him; and of walking as he walked, not only in many or in most respects, but in all things...”<sup>43</sup>

Such outward and inward conformity to Christ was indispensable if Christians were to follow the scriptural model. Wesley's only fear was that this standard should in anyway be lowered to accommodate human experience. He believed that the power to realise this way of life ultimately lay in the fact that Christ lives in believers;<sup>44</sup> consequently all that is holy, just, and good must potentially be theirs.<sup>45</sup> So, for example, as Christ was lowly in heart so the believer is purified from pride. As Christ desired only to do his Father's will, so the believer is purified from self-will and impure desire. As Christ was meek and gentle, so the believer is angry only at the right things. Another way of describing this was in terms of the fruit of the Spirit, that is

“By love, joy, peace, always abiding; by invariable long

<sup>40</sup> Hymn: *God of all power and truth and grace* [M.H.B. 562, v. 3b.]

<sup>41</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 386

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 386 Hymn: op. cit. v. 5a

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 367

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 377 see: Galatians 2 : 20

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

suffering, patience, resignation; by gentleness, triumphing over all provocation; by goodness, mildness, sweetness, tenderness of spirit; by fidelity, simplicity, godly sincerity; by meekness, calmness, evenness of spirit; by temperance, not only in food and sleep, but in all things natural and spiritual.<sup>46</sup>

In just such a way the 'perfect Christian' would 'adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things'.<sup>47</sup> Quite clearly it was through the believer's union with Christ that he or she could say '...I am full of... holiness..<sup>48</sup> This did not mean, however, that the believer was only passively involved. It is true that Christ is the one who 'purifies their hearts by faith', but it is also the case that the one who has Christ within purifies herself or himself as Christ is pure.<sup>49</sup>

The Christian then must be as his or her Master.<sup>50</sup> So Wesley wrote:

"Jesu, our life, in us appear,  
Who daily die thy death:  
.....  
Reveal thy glorious self in me:  
In every waiting heart."<sup>51</sup>

### **Devoting soul, body, and substance, not in part, but all to God**

Another way of expressing what it means to have the mind of Christ is '...to be inwardly and outwardly devoted to God, all devoted in heart and life'.<sup>52</sup> The great priority of Christ was to '...do the will of Him who had sent him ..'<sup>53</sup> something which Wesley felt must also be the emphasis in the life of every Christian.<sup>54</sup> In this respect there was no happy medium for the believer because every part of life must either be a sacrifice to God or to self, the

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<sup>46</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 422

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 373. c.f. Titus 2 : 10

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 417

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 377

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 393

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 385

<sup>53</sup> John 4 : 34

<sup>54</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 372

latter being in effect to the devil.<sup>55</sup> Every part meant all thoughts, all words, and all actions<sup>56</sup> devoted to God. In this alone would the one business of the Christian's life be accomplished, that is to do 'all to the glory of God'.<sup>57</sup> Of course, the energy to achieve this is found in God himself for all the believer's sufficiency is in him who works in him or her both 'to will and do of his good pleasure'<sup>58</sup> creating in the depths of his or her being the continual cry, 'Father thy will be done'.<sup>59</sup>

The same thought is also seen in the positive side of being 'sanctified wholly' for this means that the Christian is so devoted to God, having been cleansed from sin in body, soul, and spirit, that he or she will do the will of God on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>60</sup> So this is expressed by the Wesleys in such words as:

"From this inbred sin deliver:  
Let the yoke Now be broke;  
**Make me thine forever...**"<sup>61</sup>

Or again:

"Didst thou not die that I might live  
**No longer to myself, but thee?**  
**Might body, soul, and spirit give**  
To him who gave himself for me?  
Come then my Master, and my God,  
Take the dear purchase of thy blood."<sup>62</sup>

Such giving of soul, body, and substance should not be considered

<sup>55</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 365

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372 f. see also I Corinthians 10 : 31., Colossians 3 : 17

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379. see also Philippians 2 : 13 and Wesley's comment in his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* which reads: 'God alone, who is with you...Not for any merit of yours...Yet his influences are not to supersede, but to encourage, our own efforts...And O what a glorious encouragement, to have the arm of Omnipotence stretched out for our support and our succour!' Wesley, J., *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, [London: Wesley Conference Office, 1867] p. 306 f. [Hereafter cited as *Notes*]

<sup>59</sup> Matthew 6: 10

<sup>60</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 384

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385 Hymn: *Saviour from sin, I wait to prove* [*M.H.B.* 558, v.3.]



fanatical for in the light of Calvary the Christian could not give less. Indeed, Wesley was convinced that anything less was being half a Christian and this in itself was a contradiction in terms.<sup>63</sup>

### **Giving God all our heart with one design ruling all our tempers**

From his reading of Thomas a` Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*<sup>64</sup> Wesley believed that giving all of his life to God would profit him nothing unless he also gave his heart.<sup>65</sup> He appears to be saying that it is possible to have given all to God in service while one is still lacking in love. In this there seems to be a resonance with what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

“ If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love I am nothing.”<sup>66</sup>

A similar idea can also be seen in the Apocalypse with Christ's message to the Church at Ephesus.<sup>67</sup> So Wesley argued that as well as having one design in all we speak and do there must also be one desire ruling all our tempers.<sup>68</sup> In Wesley's mind any who really have the love of God shed abroad in their hearts ought only to want to give Christ all their affection.<sup>69</sup> From within the cry must come, 'Oh, who that loves can love enough?'<sup>70</sup> Love ought to be the one desire governing all tempers, words and actions<sup>71</sup> thus issuing in the fruit of the spirit as described by Paul in Galatians.<sup>72</sup> So

<sup>63</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 367

<sup>64</sup> A` Kempis, T., *The Imitation of Christ*, translation by Stanhope, G., [London: Routledge, 1886]

<sup>65</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 367

<sup>66</sup> I Corinthians 13 : 1 - 3

<sup>67</sup> Revelation 2 : 1 - 7

<sup>68</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 367

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 445

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 394, 397

<sup>72</sup> Galatians 5 : 22, 23

Wesley in his translation of the German hymn, 'O Jesu Christ, mein schonstes Licht', by Paulus Gerhardt, encouraged his people to pray:

"O grant that nothing in my soul  
May dwell but thy pure love alone  
O may thy love possess me whole  
My joy, my treasure, and my crown;  
Strange fires far from my heart remove:  
My every act, word, thought, be love."<sup>73</sup>

Here in essence was the perfection which Wesley believed he had understood and taught for forty years. As already stated it was of no real importance to him whether the six facets encapsulating the *Christian Perfection* he describes were taken singly or collectively, this was *Christian Perfection* in its own shape.<sup>74</sup> In this shape Wesley contended it ought to be seen because stated in such plain terms *Christian Perfection* was nothing more or less than what it meant to be truly Christian. As he concluded in the tract *The Character of a Methodist*, seen by him not only as describing for the first time his 'sentiments of *Christian Perfection*'<sup>75</sup> but also a portrait of a 'perfect Christian',<sup>76</sup> :

"If any man say, 'Why, these are only the common fundamental principles of Christianity!' thou hast said; so I mean; for this is the very truth; I know they are no other; and I would to God both thou and all men knew, that I and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity, – the plain, old Christianity that I teach, renouncing and detesting all other marks of distinction. And whosoever is what I preach [let him be

<sup>73</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 369. Hymn: *Jesu, Thy boundless love to me* [*M.H.B.* 430, v. 2.]

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 444.

- (i) Loving God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves.
- (ii) Renewal in heart, not only in part, but in the whole image of God.
- (iii) Being cleansed from all pollution both of flesh and spirit.
- (iv) Having all the mind of Christ and walking as He walked.
- (v) Devoting soul, body, and substance, not in part, but all to God.
- (vi) Giving God all our heart with one design ruling all our tempers

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371

called what he will, for names change not the nature of things], he is a Christian, not in name only, but in heart and in life. He is inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God, as revealed in the written word. He thinks, speaks, and lives according to the method laid down in the revelation of Jesus Christ. His soul is renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness. And having the mind that was in Christ he so walks as Christ also walked."<sup>77</sup>

For Wesley it was an 'absolute impossibility'<sup>78</sup> to claim to be Christian and have any other goal other than being a whole Christian. So *Christian Perfection* could only be fairly opposed if it was disguised in a bear-skin.<sup>79</sup> But it was opposed and to Wesley's bewilderment by 'religious men'<sup>80</sup> whom he had regarded as 'brethren' and 'fellow-labourers'.<sup>81</sup> He expressed his utter surprise that children of God would fight against having their Father's image. To him it was incomprehensible that members of the body of Christ would ever resist having the mind of Christ. He expressed the same sense of bewilderment at those who have God's love in their hearts wanting to withhold giving God all.<sup>82</sup>

### **Perfection on earth**

As Wesley saw it, the problem did not lie with his description of *Christian Perfection* but rather in his assertion that such a standard of Christian living could be experienced on this earth. He wrote:

"But after a time a cry arose... not that I had stated perfection

<sup>77</sup> Rupp E.G., Davies R.E., [eds.], ***A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain***, [London: Epworth Press, 1988], Vol. 4, p. 55, [Hereafter cited as ***H.M.C.G.B.***] This point of what it really means to be a Christian is also seen in the latter part of Wesley's response to Dr Conyers Middleton. ***Letters***, Vol. 2, pp. 375.vi - 388

<sup>78</sup> ***Wesley's Works***, p. 367

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 445

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 374

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 445

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



wrong, but that 'there is no perfection on earth..''<sup>83</sup>

He insisted *Christian Perfection* should be sought by every believer in this life and maintained that it was to be experienced sometime after justification but sometime before the moment of death.<sup>84</sup> Specific scriptural support that it came after justification could be found for example in the words of Hebrews when the writer exhorts the readers to 'go on unto perfection'.<sup>85</sup> Confirmation that it could be expected sometime before death is shown by Paul's reference in Philippians to 'living men that were perfect'.<sup>86</sup> While Wesley believed that God must not in any way be limited in the work of salvation in general, he saw contemporary evidence as supporting the idea that there was a fullness of salvation to be experienced which was not 'given all at once'. He stated:

"But we do not know a single instance, in any place, of a person's receiving in one and the same moment remission of sins, the abiding witness of the spirit, and a new and clean heart."<sup>87</sup>

Within the experience of the individual therefore, it was usual for God to reveal the sinfulness of the human heart gradually. After justification with its peace, rejoicing and love of God filling the heart, it would certainly be possible to feel that sin would never again be a problem. But sooner or later the battle with sin returns and indeed only the witness of the Spirit enables the believer to see that despite the sinfulness of his or her heart he or she still belongs to God. According to Wesley, if the full extent of the sinfulness of the human heart had been revealed earlier, the believer would have been unable to bear it. So gradually then the individual believer comes to recognise his or her own inability to conquer sin. However, alongside

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<sup>83</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 374

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441 f.

<sup>85</sup> Hebrews 6 : 1

<sup>86</sup> Philippians 3 : 15

<sup>87</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 380

this growing awareness of the power of sin, Wesley says there is an increasing hunger for a full renewal of the image of God in the life 'in righteousness and true holiness'. If this hunger is encouraged, eventually God will come and give the promised rest. In language that resonates with the Gospel of John and the letter to the Hebrews<sup>88</sup> Wesley wrote:

"..[God] cometh unto them with his Son and Blessed Spirit, and fixing his abode in their souls, bringeth them into the 'rest which remaineth for the people of God.'"<sup>89</sup>

This 'rest' Wesley was convinced, is none other than *Christian Perfection* and is to be sought after and experienced in this life. He recorded with approval Charles' hymn:

"Lord, I believe a rest remains  
To all thy people known,  
A rest where pure enjoyment reigns,  
And thou art lov'd alone:

A rest where all our soul's desire  
Is fixed on things above;  
Where doubt, and pain, and fear expire,  
Cast out by perfect love.

O that I **now** the rest might know,  
Believe, and enter in!  
**Now**, Saviour, **now** the power bestow,  
And let me cease from sin."<sup>90</sup>

And it was this assertion of the availability of such a 'rest' for the believer in the here and now that Wesley understood as having created the problem. For the critics of *Christian Perfection*, to state its availability to believers while they were still on earth was to teach them a 'damnable error' and create in their minds a 'fatal delusion'.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup> John 14 : 21 - 23., Hebrews 4 : 9

<sup>89</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 381

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 382. Hymn: *Lord, I believe a rest remains* [*M.H.B.* 563, vv. 1-3]

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 445

### **Perfection in a “bear-skin”**

In Wesley's mind accusations of delusion and error could really only be levelled at him with any justification if *Christian Perfection* was presented in some other guise like, for example, in a bear skin.<sup>92</sup> But such disguise was in part the result of the self-created notions of others, as he stated:

“I fear many stumble on this stumbling-block. They include as many ingredients as they please, not according to Scripture, but their own imagination, in their idea of one that is perfect; and then readily deny any one to be such, who does not answer that imaginary idea.”<sup>93</sup>

So Wesley suggested that perhaps, in the main, the general prejudice against *Christian Perfection* arose out of a misapprehension of its true nature.<sup>94</sup> By implication, if the bear skins were identified and removed *Christian Perfection* would be seen in its own shape, as it is revealed in the Scriptures, the problem therefore ought to disappear. While Wesley does not name the bear skins it does seem to the present writer that there are at least three areas where they might be found.

### **The bear-skin of absolute perfection**

*Christian Perfection* which begins in the here and now is necessarily a limited perfection and should never be understood in absolute terms. Wesley maintained that absolute perfection could neither belong to men nor to angels but to God alone.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, if such perfection was not even possessed by angels who had not fallen, how much less could hope of such flawlessness befall humanity? Furthermore, Angelic or Adamic

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<sup>92</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 445

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442

perfection<sup>96</sup> could not be attained by humanity for it is not possible for 'any inhabitant of a house of clay' to be entirely free from 'ignorance, mistake, temptation, and a thousand infirmities necessarily connected ..' with living in a 'shattered'<sup>97</sup> 'corruptible body'.<sup>98</sup> *Christian Perfection*, as Wesley perceived it, would not make a person 'infallible'.<sup>99</sup> He stated:

".. neither love nor the 'unction of the Holy One' makes us infallible".<sup>100</sup>

In this sense, therefore, Wesley certainly saw himself as supporting the statement that 'there was no perfection possible on earth'.

### **The bear-skin of sinless perfection**

Some apparently had placed *Christian Perfection* in the bear skin of 'sinless' perfection.<sup>101</sup> Wesley reasoned that this was perhaps why those whom he saw as his 'fellow-labourers in the vineyard' regarded him as an enemy.<sup>102</sup> In this regard Wesley's final conclusion is that, while it is not worth contending for a term, perfection, as he understood it, can be nothing less than 'salvation from sin'.<sup>103</sup> He believed that even new Christians are 'so far perfect as not to commit sin'.<sup>104</sup>

This he considered to be strongly affirmed by John in his first epistle when he wrote:

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<sup>96</sup> Wesley believes that ' .. no man is able to perform the service which the Adamic law requires.' This law he sees as the same in substance as the Angelic law hence the implication that is not to be seen in terms of either Angelic or Adamic perfection. *Wesley's Works*, p.414 f. See also sermon *On Perfection*, *The Works of John Wesley, The Bicentennial Edition*, editor-in-chief Baker, F., [Oxford and Nashville: University Press and Abingdon, 1975-], Volume 3, p.72 f. [Hereafter cited as *Wesley's Works*, (BE)]

<sup>97</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 419

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 383

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 442

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 417

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 442

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 445

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 375

“..he that is born of God sinneth not..”<sup>105</sup>

Wesley argued that this affirmation was in no way challenged by statements or examples from the Old or New Testament which seem to suggest that ‘all Christians do and must commit sin as long as they live’. Any thought of support for sinning Christians in the Old Testament should be dismissed when it is recognised that the Jewish dispensation can no longer be the measure of those living in the ‘fullness of time’. God’s great salvation has been revealed in Jesus Christ and Christians are now living post-Pentecost.<sup>106</sup> Of course, it might be pointed out that the Apostles did commit sin in this new dispensation. However, in Wesley’s opinion, if they did it was not because they were unable to do otherwise but rather that they had failed to appropriate the grace of God in their lives.<sup>107</sup> Again, it might be said that John himself denied the possibility of salvation from sin. Wesley quoted John as saying:

“If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves;.. ...If we say we have not sinned we make him a liar and his word is not in us....”<sup>108</sup>

But in Wesley’s understanding these verses refer to the past condition and cannot be seen as justifying the continued existence of sin in the Christian. He considered the explanation comes in the middle verse when John stated:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just , and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness”.<sup>109</sup>

Here Wesley understood that Christians will not only know forgiveness for the past, but as the phrase ‘cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ indicates, they will also have the potential to ‘go and sin no more’.<sup>110</sup> Certainly Wesley

<sup>105</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, p.375 c.f. 1 John 3 : 9

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> 1 John 1 : 8 a., 10

<sup>109</sup> 1 John 1 : 9

<sup>110</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, p. 376



recognised the difference between having the potential for salvation from sin and actually experiencing salvation from sin in everyday life. He believed that while Christians have such potential usually they do not fully experience such possibilities until after the depth and power of inbred sin in their own hearts has been thoroughly exposed and dealt with.<sup>111</sup> The necessity of this interval Wesley attributed to human frailty<sup>112</sup> though he accepted that the Almighty must not be limited as to when He does the work of perfecting the soul in love.<sup>113</sup> As already suggested this exposure of the true condition of the human heart really serves to convince believers of the continued existence of sin in their lives, and of their own inability to conquer it, thus increasing the hunger for a complete renewal in the image of God until the work is brought about.<sup>114</sup> But caution needs to be exercised in claiming that such a renewal has been effected, for even Christians in a 'high state of grace' have been known to have been mistaken, confusing the suspension of sin with its total destruction.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, Wesley was convinced that sin need not remain until death for there is both biblical evidence and authentic contemporary witness to support fully the possibility of living in freedom from sin now.<sup>116</sup>

### **Biblical Evidence**

At the Conference of 1747 the issue as to whether or not it should be the

<sup>111</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 380 f.

<sup>112</sup> Wesley states: "And now first do they see the ground of their heart; which God before could not disclose unto them, lest the soul should fail before him, and the spirit which he had made." *Ibid.*, p. 381

<sup>113</sup> Wesley quotes with obvious approval from a letter sent to him by a friend: "[God] dispenses his gifts just as he pleases; therefore it is neither wise nor modest to affirm that a person must be a believer for any length of time before he is capable of receiving a high degree of the Spirit of holiness." *Ibid.*, p.407

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406

expectation of the believer 'to be saved from all sin before the article of death'<sup>117</sup> was clearly a matter of concern. The question was asked:

"Is there any clear scripture promise of this, that God will save us from all sin?"<sup>118</sup>

Beginning in the Old Testament with Psalm 130 and the words

"He shall redeem Israel from all his sins."<sup>119</sup>

a number of verses are cited. The words in Ezekiel:

"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you: I will also save you from all your uncleanness."<sup>120</sup>

provide a promise of which it is stated none be could clearer. Paul referred to it in one of his letters to Corinth.<sup>121</sup> Similar clarity is also reckoned to be seen in the words from Deuteronomy:

"The Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul."<sup>122</sup>

Conference considered that in the New Testament the promise was stated in the 'plainest terms' as in:

"For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil"

"Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for it, that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it might be holy and without blemish"

"God sent his Son, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit."<sup>123</sup>

Alongside these promises the expectation of being saved from all sin can

<sup>117</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 388 f.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> verse 8

<sup>120</sup> Ezekiel 34 : 25,29

<sup>121</sup> 2 Corinthians 7 : 1

<sup>122</sup> Deuteronomy 30 : 6

<sup>123</sup> 1 John 3 : 8., Ephesians 5 : 25 – 27., Romans 8 : 3 – 4

also be seen in some of the prayers<sup>124</sup> recorded in the New Testament. For example, the words of Jesus 'deliver us from evil' if answered must mean there 'can be no sin remaining'.<sup>125</sup> Then there are the commands as in:

"Be ye perfect as your Father who is in heaven is perfect."<sup>126</sup>

or in:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."<sup>127</sup>

With the latter command the understanding is that if the love of God really fills all the heart then there can be no room for sin. Of course, Wesley recognised that not everyone would agree that these promises and commands gave clear support for the expectation of salvation from sin before death. Yet for him they could only make sense if applied to the living.<sup>128</sup> But if this were so, witnesses ought to be found, within the scriptures themselves, that have succeeded in living such a life. Wesley quoted the Conference of 1747<sup>129</sup> as answering in the affirmative, citing the Apostle John 'and all those of whom he says':

"Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because, as he is, so are we in this world."<sup>130</sup>

### **Contemporary Witness**

With regard to authentic contemporary witness the same Conference of 1747 wondered about the motives of those who would seek such witnesses. It could be that they only wanted to find fault. The real profit of such witness to the genuine seeker of *Christian Perfection* was doubtful

<sup>124</sup> John 17 : 20 – 23., Ephesians 3 : 14 – 20., 1 Thessalonians 5 : 23

<sup>125</sup> **Wesley's Works**, p. 389

<sup>126</sup> Matthew 5 : 48

<sup>127</sup> Matthew 22 : 37

<sup>128</sup> The following texts are referred too in order to show that the call to perfection is in this life: Titus 2 :11– 14., Luke 1 :69 – 75

<sup>129</sup> **Wesley's Works**, p. 388

<sup>130</sup> 1 John 4 :17



anyway. Rather than being concerned about the danger to other Christians of false profession it may be more a case of envy at another's attainments or even unbelief at the works of God. Conference was of the opinion that the underlying cause of the call for witnesses to *Christian Perfection* was the real distaste for the claim to be saved from all sin. Certainly it would be very difficult for any witness given such a climate of hostility.

Nevertheless, Wesley does refer to two names in the *Plain Account* whom he believed to be contemporary witnesses of the scriptural experience of *Christian Perfection*, namely Arvid Gradin and Jane Cooper.<sup>131</sup> Described as the 'full assurance of faith' Gradin, at Wesley's request, defined his experience in the following words:

"Repose in the blood of Jesus; a firm confidence in God, and a persuasion of his favour; the highest tranquillity, serenity, and peace of mind, with a deliverance from every fleshly desire, and a cessation of all, even inward sins."<sup>132</sup>

Those words 'deliverance from every fleshly desire, and a cessation of all, even inward sins' he believes unequivocally bear witness to a life in which there is freedom from sin now. With Jane Cooper, described by Wesley as both a 'living and dying witness of *Christian Perfection*', the same was true. In a letter to Wesley she gave an account of how she came into the experience of *Christian Perfection*. Wesley had preached on the text:

"For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness."<sup>133</sup>

During the course of the sermon Wesley had read a letter which described the religion for which she longed. With this goal in sight she told how she went about obtaining it. Convinced of the sinfulness of her own heart, she said '...I saw clearly the true state of my soul...', she desired to be 'saved

<sup>131</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p 369, 409

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369 f.

<sup>133</sup> Galatians 5 : 5

from sin', for sin to be 'destroyed'. She recognised the pardon of God and loved him but it was not love without a rival. She wrote '..I had no doubt of his pardoning love: but t'was worse than death my God to love and not my God alone..' As is suggested by her suicidal thoughts and wish of isolation from other Christians, the sense of sinfulness was stronger now than it had been at conversion. However, through prayer and holding on to God's promises, as revealed in His word, she arrived at her goal. The experience appears to have been received instantaneously through faith and was accompanied by assurance. It resulted in a consciousness of Christ being all to her and a conviction that she would see evil no more. She saw and felt something of the reality of the ideal of love expressed in Paul's first letter to Corinthians, chapter 13. She was still aware of her own 'shortcomings' and that she was not all she would be in the future, nevertheless she felt a measure of the love there described. Clearly this was not seen as a static experience but one dependent by faith on a moment by moment relationship with God. She said, 'I am happy in God this moment, and I believe for the next..'. She was conscious of her need of the atoning blood and the importance of watchful prayer if the relationship was to be maintained. She wrote '..it is by faith I stand, and that watching unto prayer must be the guard of faith'.

Wesley then included an account of her death during which she is said to have affirmed her belief that God had saved her from all sin, a conviction which she had held for several months.<sup>134</sup> The underlying implication of this account seems to be that she faced death with confidence thus confirming the reality in her experience of, and witness to, *Christian Perfection*.

In the light of this, freedom from sin does not really seem to mean 'freedom from sin'. For if, as the contemporary witnesses seem to imply, there is still a

<sup>134</sup> *Wesley's Works*, pp. 411-414

continuing need for the atonement it would appear that sin still remains. But this, apparently, is dependent on what is meant by sin remaining. Wesley did not want to suggest that anyone who lives in a 'house of clay' inherited from the Fall and who accepts the definition of sin as 'a transgression of the law' could ever be entirely free from the powerful and all pervasive nature of sin. He said:

"..there is no such perfection in this life, as implies an entire deliverance, either from ignorance, or mistake, in things not essential to salvation, or from manifold temptations, or from numberless infirmities, wherewith the corruptible body more or less presses down the soul".<sup>135</sup>

Such things must be identified as sin in need of atonement for they are a violation of the perfect law and without the atoning blood they would result in eternal damnation.<sup>136</sup> He was utterly convinced of the continued necessity of the work of Christ, in general, and the work of the atonement, in particular, despite his insistence that we are living under the law of love as he said:

"The holiest of men still need Christ, as their Prophet, as the 'light of the world'. For he does not give them light, but from moment to moment : the instant he withdraws, all is darkness. They still need Christ as their King; for God does not give them a stock of holiness. But unless they receive a supply every moment, nothing but unholiness would remain. They still need Christ as their Priest, to make atonement for their holy things. Even perfect holiness is acceptable to God only through Jesus Christ."<sup>137</sup>

*Christian Perfection*, as Wesley understood it, certainly does not remove the need of the atonement. He asked

"But do we not in many things offend all, yea the best of us, even against this law ? "<sup>138</sup>

He replied:

<sup>135</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 383

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 395

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 417

<sup>138</sup> Here he is speaking of the law of love under which the Christian is now subject.

"In one sense we do not...But in another we do, and shall do, more or less, as long as we remain in the body. For neither love nor unction of the Holy One makes us infallible....."<sup>139</sup>

So in Wesley's mind there was no conflict at all in praying on the one hand, 'forgive us our trespasses'<sup>140</sup> and on the other hand, claiming *Christian Perfection* because sin still remained while the Christian was in the corruptible body. But this leaves the difficulty of making sense, in any meaningful way, of the assertion that there is such a thing as freedom from sin. As the above statement implies, Wesley believed sense could be made of it if his understanding of the term was adhered to. He attempted to draw a distinction between what should and should not be called sin. He argued that there was a need to differentiate between the 'voluntary transgression of a known law' and the 'involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown'.<sup>141</sup> It is not possible for even the best of Christians to say that they are free from unconscious sin. Indeed those who claim to have experienced *Christian Perfection* are, according to Wesley, more convinced than ever of the need of Christ's atoning work for they agree:

"Every moment, Lord, I want  
The merit of thy death!"<sup>142</sup>

However, this being said, Wesley could not accept that God would want or allow a state of affairs to exist where it was impossible for the Christian to be free of conscious sin. How could those who say they love God with all their hearts willingly participate in something which was diametrically opposed to God? No doubt as in a natural sense so too in the spiritual sense it is possible to profess to love someone and yet be unconscious of a wrong attitude or action which is contrary to that testimony. But to protest one's

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<sup>139</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 417

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443. [see also p. 395.] Hymn: *To the haven of Thy breast* [*M.H.B.* 459, v. 4]



love and consciously hurt the object of that love by persisting in what knowingly is a wrong attitude or action must surely make such protestations sound very hollow. In Wesley's eyes this was not in any way to minimise the depth and power of sin in the human heart to make it do the wrong thing. It has already been seen that Wesley believed the extent of this corruption to be so frightening that God usually had to withhold a full revelation to the young believer until later.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, Wesley noted the danger of believing that sin is destroyed when in reality at best it may only be suspended and at worst a case of 'pride and enthusiasm'.<sup>144</sup> Wesley would not want to be seen as suggesting any diminution of the power of sin. Rather it was seen as maximising on the power of the indwelling Christ for, as Wesley understood Paul writing in Galatians, with Christ in residence "all that is holy, and just, and good"<sup>145</sup> must live in the believer. This must not only be understood in the sense of an imputed righteousness, as in:

"I am in myself nothing but sin, darkness, hell; but thou art my light, my holiness, my heaven"<sup>146</sup>

As Wesley saw it, it should also be understood in the sense of an infused or imparted righteousness, as in:

"Thou art my light, my holiness, my heaven. Through my union with thee, **I am** full of light, of holiness, and happiness..."<sup>147</sup>

In and through this union he believed Christians could experience a 'full deliverance' from the 'carnal mind which is enmity against God'.<sup>148</sup> Such a deliverance means that a spiritual circumcision has been effected in the heart cutting away 'all inward as well as outward pollution'<sup>149</sup> so enabling

<sup>143</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 381

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 405, 406 f.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 445

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 444. Look at Colossians 3 : 11



believers to love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength; not forgetting their neighbour as themselves.<sup>150</sup> Loving God like this means there can be nothing in the life which is consciously opposed to God. It is, as Jane Cooper described it, Christ reigning in the 'heart without a rival'.<sup>151</sup> Because Christians live in a 'shattered body'<sup>152</sup> there would still be things in their lives which are contrary to God thus making necessary the continued work of the atonement. Wesley stated:

"Were it not for the abiding merit of his death, and his continual intercession for us, that law would condemn us still. These therefore we still need for every transgression of it."<sup>153</sup>

But he argued that Christians are now under the law of faith and this law is fulfilled by love, as Paul stated:

"He that loves has fulfilled the law; for love is the fulfilling of the law."<sup>154</sup>

All God requires of the believer is 'faith working by love'.<sup>155</sup> The fact that there is no willing participation of the self means these cannot, in Wesley's understanding, strictly speaking, be placed in the category of sin. However, when it comes to the matter of temptation, Wesley recognised that such a distinction could be difficult to maintain. How can Christians possibly be sure that what they are calling temptation might not be more honestly identified as 'corruption' of heart? While acknowledging the difficulty he nevertheless believed it is possible in general to differentiate. He said:

"in general one may distinguish thus:  
One commends me. Here is temptation to pride. But instantly my soul is humbled before God. And I feel no pride; of which I am as sure, as that pride is not humility.

<sup>150</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 416

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419. 'That law' is presumably the law of Moses for there is here an allusion to Romans 10 : 4.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396, see Romans 13 : 10

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416

A man strikes me. Here is temptation to anger. But my heart overflows with love. And I feel no anger at all; of which I am as sure, as that love and anger are not the same.

A woman solicits me. Here is temptation to lust. But in the instant I shrink back. And I feel no desire or lust at all; of which I can be as sure, as that my hand is cold or hot."<sup>156</sup>

This Wesley believed holds true whether the object of the temptation is 'present' or 'absent'. Of course there will be cases where it would be impossible to distinguish but in these instances Wesley relied on the direct witness of the Spirit.<sup>157</sup>

So freedom from sin is to be understood in terms of not being conscious of participating, either outwardly or inwardly, in anything contrary to love of God and neighbour. But given this understanding, which may seem to some to be saying considerably less than when it was first stated, it might then be argued that *Christian Perfection* is really nothing more or less than sincere living. Wesley rejected this, contending that a person can be sincere but still have all their 'natural tempers' as in 'pride, anger, lust, and self-will'. Not until the 'heart is cleansed from these and all its other corruptions' can a person really experience:

"..love filling the heart, expelling pride, anger, desire, self-will; rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks."<sup>158</sup>

This is *Christian Perfection* and Wesley doubted that few, if any, would intend such an understanding when they used the word 'sincerity'.

### **The bear-skin of perfection as an "indivisible point"**

Wesley argued that *Christian Perfection* was 'improvable'.<sup>159</sup> He stated:

"It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable

<sup>156</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 419

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 418

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 442

of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before"<sup>160</sup>

Despite the contradiction of being able to improve on perfection Wesley was at least consistent in his continued rejection of *Christian Perfection* as a finished state. Whatever occurred in the moment of *Christian Perfection* while it would facilitate greater growth, it was not to be regarded as the terminus of Christian growth. In what was seen by Wesley as the 'strongest account'<sup>161</sup> that he or his brother had ever given of *Christian Perfection* he contended that it is:

"Not that they have already attained all that they shall attain, either are already in this sense perfect. But they daily 'go on from strength; beholding' now, 'as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, they are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord.'"<sup>162</sup>

The call therefore could be said to be always to 'go on to perfection', indeed right into eternity.<sup>163</sup> There never was, nor seemingly ever could be, any such thing as a 'perfection of degrees'.<sup>164</sup> *Christian Perfection* should always be seen as dynamic in its nature. Jane Cooper in her testimony to *Christian Perfection* stated:

"I was in a moment enabled to lay hold on Jesus Christ...I know it is by faith I stand; and that watching unto prayer must be the guard of faith. I am happy in God this moment, and I believe for the next. I have often read the chapter you mention, (1 Corinthians 13) and in so doing, I feel my shortcomings, and the need I have of the atoning blood. Yet I dare not say, I do not feel a measure of the love there described, though I am not all I shall be."<sup>165</sup>

Miss Cooper obviously understood it as a moment by moment relationship

<sup>160</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 442

<sup>161</sup> According to Wesley this was the preface to a second volume of hymns. *Ibid.*, p. 378

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>163</sup> Wesley stated: "... Yet he still grows in grace, in the knowledge of Christ, in the love and image of God; and will do so, not only till death, but to all eternity". *Ibid.*, p. 402

<sup>164</sup> After the meeting with the Bishop of London Wesley stated: "There is no perfection of degrees, none which does not admit of a continual increase." *Ibid.*, p.374

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411

with the living Christ; a relationship which would always be capable of increased growth and one which was totally dependent on the work of Christ. That Wesley endorsed this understanding must be evident, not least because, had he not, it would never have been included in the *Plain Account*. But even more in his own statements it is clear he wanted to reject any notion which suggested that *Christian Perfection* could ever be a completed state. In terms of growth and of dependence on the atonement<sup>166</sup> the crucial place of the 'now' is unmistakable.<sup>167</sup> Moreover Wesley's insistence on the continued active involvement of the individual believer in his or her experience coupled with his acceptance that it could be lost<sup>168</sup> as well as regained<sup>169</sup> also reinforced this point. This is well illustrated in the 'advice' and 'reflections' which he gave towards the latter part of the *Plain Account*.<sup>170</sup>

Here Wesley gave several pieces of 'advice' followed by a number of

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<sup>166</sup> above p. 33. If the work of atonement was going to be rendered in any way surplus by the concept of *Christian Perfection*, Wesley would abandon it and not the doctrine of atonement. **Wesley's Works**, p.418

<sup>167</sup> He stated: "They are all love today; and they take no thought for tomorrow." Ibid., p.443 Then again it was 'moment by moment' that they received the light of Christ enabling them to walk in 'light', 'holiness' and 'happiness'. Ibid., p. 417 (Strong resonances here with 1 John 1: 5-7 where the emphasis is on 'walking in the light')

<sup>168</sup> The summary includes the point that "is amissible, capable of being lost, of which we have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this 'till five or six years ago" Ibid., p. 442

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 427

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., pp. 427-441



'reflections' on that counsel.<sup>171</sup> The 'reflections' really elaborate on the 'advice'. His stated purpose was to help the person who is 'saved from sin' to continue to 'grow in grace'<sup>172</sup> and avoid 'stumbling'.<sup>173</sup> In the 'advices' Wesley began with a warning about pride. As God alone is the source of all blessing the perfect Christian should always watch and pray against pride. Alongside pride, enthusiasm could lead the sincere into unscriptural ways. It was necessary therefore to exercise prayerful study of the scriptures as a sure corrective. Inseparable from enthusiasm was the danger of antinomianism; a problem made all the more dangerous because it did have good points. The perfect Christian must be vigilant to all its subtleties even though they come in 'a thousand forms'.<sup>174</sup> Sins of omission were another threat to those who were 'saved from all sin'. The perfect Christian therefore should lose no opportunity in doing good. This included 'works of piety' as well as 'works of mercy'.<sup>175</sup> Desiring something in the place of God was a further pitfall to be avoided. The perfect Christian must not be hindered in his or her pursuit for God either by pleasure or by pain. He or she therefore must seek to remain in the liberty of Christ.<sup>176</sup> Emphasising the unity of the body of Christ Wesley also warned against anything which

<sup>171</sup> In all there are seven pieces of "advice" and eight "reflections". The advice, as can be seen above, concerns the dangers of: Pride, Enthusiasm, Antinomianism, Sins of omission, Desiring anything else but God, Schism and finally the positive recommendation to be exemplary in all things. The "reflections" on this counsel are more difficult to summarise in a few words. Basically, in the order in which Wesley presents the "reflections" they are as follows: God and the Spirit are likened to the sea into which every Christian, like all rivers, returns; Resignation is about resignation to the whole will of God; Patience and humility are inextricably linked in all increases of the experience of the love of God; Following in the steps of Christ particularly in relation to bearing with people and suffering evil in meekness and silence; Prayer was the absolute imperative of the life of God in the soul; Discipline in the smallest details was important in the walk with God; Self-examination will be an ongoing practice encouraged by a Spiritual Director; While the foregoing have focused on the importance of human effort the final reflection returns to the theme of the first, the grace of God and the Christian's utter dependence on Him.

<sup>172</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 426

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432 see: Galatians 5: 1



might tend or lead to schism.<sup>177</sup> In the body of Christ the root of all disunity was the failure of its members to have reciprocal love 'one for another'. Wesley stressed the need of the members to avail themselves of the provision to be found in the society and band with their rules and practice. Finally the perfect Christian should seek to be exemplary in all things. Dress, money, demeanour and conversation are particularly noted as ways in which the light of the gospel can shine in a 'dark place'.<sup>178</sup> In this advice the responsibility on the individual Christian to continue to 'work out' his or her own 'salvation' is unmistakable. This is not to say that Wesley was in anyway denying the grace of God. In the 'reflections' which followed, 'reflections' which according to Wesley 'strongly enforced' the 'advice', he used the image of the sea to portray the fullness of God and the Spirit. He stated:

"The sea is an excellent figure of the fulness of God, and that of the blessed Spirit. For as the rivers all return into the sea; so the bodies, the souls, and the good works of the righteous, return into God..."<sup>179</sup>

In this image, despite the importance of the 'practice of good works',<sup>180</sup> the Christian's utter dependence on God is obvious. Wesley maintained that for 'all the grace and works' the Christian is 'indebted' to God,<sup>181</sup> 'because they proceed from him and his grace.'<sup>182</sup> Hence he advised all who experience God's favour to constantly pray:<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Among the things listed which Wesley considers could be divisive is the name for *Christian Perfection*. He states: 'Avoid all magnificent, pompous words; indeed, you need give it no general name; neither perfection, sanctification, the second blessing, nor having attained. Rather speak of the particulars God has wrought for you' **Wesley's Works**, p. 434

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 435

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 440

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 441

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 440

<sup>183</sup> According to Wesley, "God's command to 'pray without ceasing' is founded on the necessity we have of his grace to preserve the life of God in the soul, which can no more subsist without it, than the body can without air". Ibid., p. 438

“ ‘ I come, Lord to restore to thee what thou hast given; and I freely relinquish it, to enter again into my own nothingness. For what is the most perfect creature in heaven or earth in thy presence, but a void capable of being filled with thee and by thee; as the air, which is void and dark, is capable of being filled with the light of the sun, who withdraws it everyday to restore it the next, there being nothing in the air that either appropriates this light or resists it? O give the same facility of receiving and restoring thy grace and good works! I say thine; for I acknowledge the root from which they spring is in thee, and not in me’ ”<sup>184</sup>

It seems that Wesley was saying, ‘All things come from you O Lord and of your own have we given you’.<sup>185</sup> The river is returning to its ‘source’.<sup>186</sup> This emphasis on what might be described as ‘responsible grace’<sup>187</sup> continues throughout the ‘reflections’. Prayer expressed dependence on God but it also demanded effort from the individual. So ‘every new victory is the effect of a new prayer’<sup>188</sup> but the very thought was in the first place ‘formed in us and with us’ by God.<sup>189</sup> Service could only be considered to be truly in the service of God when God himself used the ‘tongue, hands, and heart, to do by himself and his Spirit whatever he would have us do.’<sup>190</sup> However, God would not give his Spirit to those who failed to ask him and indeed to keep on asking.<sup>191</sup> Of course, constant vigilance should always be exercised if the individual was to remain in the love of God.<sup>192</sup> This would be seen not only in the matter of service but also with regard to temptation and sin.<sup>193</sup> Also, the

<sup>184</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, p. 441

<sup>185</sup> 1 Chronicles 29: 14. Words sometimes used in the Anglican offertory prayer

<sup>186</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, p. 441

<sup>187</sup> This term is identified by Maddox as the “orienting concept” in Wesley’s theology which he argued should allow Wesley to be considered as a serious theologian. Maddox, R.L., *Responsible Grace: The systematic nature of Wesley’s theology reconsidered*, *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 6, 1986, pp. 24-34

<sup>188</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, p. 437

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 437

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 438 Here Wesley refers to the ‘greatest temptations’ and ‘the least grain of sin’ thus in the opinion of the present writer confirming the view that it is not a state. In other words it is not a ‘perfection of degrees’.

watchfulness should always be aimed Godward. In temptation it was the look at Christ which could 'overcome the wicked one.'<sup>194</sup> In sin and failure, while not stated here this is clear from the rest of the *Plain Account*, the same power would be sufficient.<sup>195</sup> No doubt the special times of self examination should also be included in this watchfulness.<sup>196</sup> It would appear that Wesley encouraged such times because he believed they would act as an aid to continual renewal within the life of the believer.<sup>197</sup>

Perhaps two further observations should be made on the 'reflections' in relation to what could be described as the dynamic aspects of *Christian Perfection*. Wesley, evidently, viewed suffering and affliction as a continued means of growth for the perfect Christian. He observed that:

"The best helps to growth in grace are the ill usage, the affronts, and the losses...If we suffer persecution and affliction in a right manner, we attain a larger measure of conformity to Christ, by a due improvement of one of these occasions, than we could have done merely by imitating his mercy, in abundance of good works".<sup>198</sup>

Clearly the guiding thought here is 'having all the mind of Christ and walking he walked'.<sup>199</sup> Yet this was obviously not to be understood in the sense of having arrived but rather in the context of growth. Such growth would occur as the individual continued to embrace, through grace, suffering and affliction ('even unto death') with 'true resignation', seeing it as 'the whole will of God'.<sup>200</sup> Certainly this would explain Wesley's inclusion in the *Plain Account* of the reported details of Miss Cooper's death.<sup>201</sup> The other observation concerns what appears to be an oblique reference to a

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<sup>194</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 438

<sup>195</sup> See this chapter pp. 22-26.

<sup>196</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 439

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 436

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 436

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 411-414

spiritual director. In the penultimate 'reflection', where Wesley encouraged special times of examination for the perfect Christian, he stated:

"There is no faithfulness like that which ought to be between a guide of souls and the person directed by him. They ought continually to regard each other in God, and closely to examine themselves, whether all their thoughts are pure, and all their words directed with Christian discretion. Other affairs are only the things of men; but these are peculiarly the things of God."<sup>202</sup>

If this is indeed a reference to a spiritual director then as well as endorsing the dynamic nature of *Christian Perfection*, it further emphasises the view that *Christian Perfection* is dependent on the supporting structures which were to be found within the fellowship of the societies, classes and bands.

Given this reading of the *Plain Account*, it could be argued that *Christian Perfection* is nothing more or less than Wesley's term for whole-hearted Christianity. But if this is the case it does raise the difficulty as to why so many have opposed the concept then and since. Clearly there are problems which cannot be so easily dismissed. However, before tackling such difficulties, no understanding of *Christian Perfection* would be complete without considering the work of Fletcher, the man who has been credited with developing the 'first formal theology of Wesley's doctrine of *Christian Perfection*.'<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 439

<sup>203</sup> Dieter, M.E., *The Wesleyan Perspective*, in *Five Views on Sanctification*, p. 44



## Chapter 2 Christian Perfection - Fletcher's elaboration

### Introduction

Fletcher himself identified the sources where his understanding of *Christian Perfection* could be found. In a letter to Mary Bosanquet, later to become Mrs Fletcher, he stated:

"If you ask me what I think to be the truth with respect to Christian Perfection, I reply, my sentiments are exposed to the world in my essay on 'Christian Perfection', and in my essay on 'Truth', where I lay the stress of the doctrine on the great promise of the Father, and on the Christian fullness of the Spirit. This I have done more particularly in a treatise on the 'Birth of the Spirit'."<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that any attempt to understand what Fletcher meant by *Christian Perfection* must at least begin with these three essays. They are to be found in Fletcher's Works under the following headings:

*The Last Check to Antinomianism*<sup>2</sup>

*An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism (Part One): An essay on Truth*<sup>3</sup>

*The New Birth : A discourse.*<sup>4</sup>

### The Last Check to Antinomianism

Of all the explanations on the subject of *Christian Perfection*, Fletcher's essay, identified in his *Works* as *The Last Check to Antinomianism*, is probably second only to John Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian*

<sup>1</sup> Tyerman L., *Wesley's Designated Successor: The Life, Letters, and Literary Labours of the Rev. John William Fletcher* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1882] p. 411.

<sup>2</sup> Benson J. (ed.), *The Works of the Rev. John Fletcher*, [London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1860] Vol. V, p p. 399 - 472., Vol. VI, p p. 1 - 224. [Hereafter cited as *Fletcher's Works*]

<sup>3</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p p. 5 - 123. Wesley told Fletcher that this essay was 'as convincing as anything you have written' Telford, J., (ed.), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, [London: Epworth Press, 1931], VI, p.146. [Hereafter cited as *Letters*]

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, p p. 303 - 336



*Perfection*.<sup>5</sup> Certainly Wesley himself regarded the *Checks* very highly, he wrote:

"..one knows not which to admire most, the purity of the language, the strength and clearness of the argument, or the mildness and sweetness of the spirit that breathes throughout the whole.." <sup>6</sup>

Regarding the *Last Check* in particular he told Fletcher:

"I do not perceive that you have granted too much, or that there is any difference between us. The Address to the Perfect I approve of most, and think it will have a good effect. But there may be some danger of growing too voluminous, for then the work will come into fewer hands." <sup>7</sup>

This did not mean that Wesley was not in agreement with the rest of the essay. While it is true there are indications of a difference of opinion between the two men, it seems fair to state that if Wesley had not approved of the essay he would not have published it.<sup>8</sup> The matter of it being 'too voluminous' had already been recognised by Fletcher himself. He wrote to Joseph Benson on 12 July 1775 from Madeley:

"I have just finished my Treatise on Perfection. It will be a large book; but I thought I must touch the subject fully, or not meddle with it." <sup>9</sup>

How does he 'touch the subject' in this essay? The setting was the controversy between the Calvinists and the Arminians concerning the question of the removal of 'indwelling sin' in the life of the believer. Both parties had subscribed to the existence of 'indwelling sin'. The doctrine of the Church of England, to which they had professed allegiance, stated:

"Original sin stands not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk) but it is the fault and corruption of the

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<sup>5</sup> Peters, p. 71

<sup>6</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol., XI, p. 300

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, Brecon, August 15, 1775, to John Fletcher, *Letters*, Vol., VI p. 175

<sup>8</sup> As Wesley himself indicated he assumed the responsibility for publishing. *Fletcher's Works*, [London: Paramore, 1795], Vol. III, p. viii

<sup>9</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol., I, p. 172

nature of every man, that naturally are engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from the original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusts always contrary to the spirit, and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserves God's wrath and damnation. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them which are regenerated..."<sup>10</sup>

Both were agreed that this 'infection of nature' must be purged if the believer was to see a holy God and dwell with him forever for nothing unholy or unclean could ever enter the 'heavenly Jerusalem'.<sup>11</sup> The disagreement came as to when and how this removal could and should take place.<sup>12</sup> As Fletcher perceived it the Calvinists taught that the 'inbred man of sin' could only be removed at the stroke of death<sup>13</sup> leaving the Christian to 'struggle with the waves of immorality or the billows of corruption' until then.<sup>14</sup> To Fletcher such teaching was not too far removed from the doctrine of purgatory taught by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup> He called it 'death purgatory'.<sup>16</sup>

Fletcher on the other hand maintained that the removal of 'indwelling sin' could and should take place before death. He asserted that the believer could be radically cleansed from all sin without the least assistance from death when the blood of Christ was fully applied by the Spirit through a steadfast faith.<sup>17</sup> This was 'the precious jewel' of *Christian Perfection* which must again be recovered if perfect Christianity was to be rescued from attack as a dangerous monster or ridiculed as a lack of self-knowledge or

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<sup>10</sup> The Ninth Article of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England [1571] ed., Noll Mark A., in *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation*, [Leicester: Apollos, 1991], p 216 f. [Hereafter cited as Noll]

<sup>11</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol.,V, p. 410

<sup>12</sup> As will be seen later both parties while using the same words did not actually mean exactly the same thing. (pp. 55 f. below)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

pride.<sup>18</sup> Believing that ignorance was the major cause of controversy between God-fearing men, he proposed to effect this rescue and recovery by 'setting the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* in a proper point of view'.<sup>19</sup> Fletcher divided the essay into two main parts:

The Argumentative<sup>20</sup>

The Practical<sup>21</sup>

## **The Argumentative**

### **Christian Perfection: the definition**

Beginning with the word perfection, Fletcher pointed out what he believed to be its biblical roots. In general terms he defined the meaning of perfection as:

"the maturity of grace peculiar to established believers under their respective dispensations".<sup>22</sup>

More particularly *Christian Perfection* was defined as:

"the maturity of grace and holiness, which established, adult believers attain to under the Christian dispensation".<sup>23</sup>

This maturity was further defined in terms of 'perfect repentance', 'perfect faith', 'perfect humility', 'perfect meekness', 'perfect self-denial', 'perfect resignation', 'perfect hope', 'perfect charity' and 'Perfect Love'. According to Fletcher these were 'the cluster and maturity of graces which composed the Christian character in the church militant'.<sup>24</sup> Whether or not this could in any way be interpreted as 'sinless perfection' depended on whether a person was considered to be under the law of Adam or under the law of Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> Fletcher's Works Vol. V, p. 407

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.41

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Vol. VI, p.132

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Vol. V, p. 414

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 415

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

The Adamic Law was described as the 'law of paradisiacal obedience' given to Adam before the fall. Fletcher rejected any notion of 'sinlessness' under this law. How could anyone 'conceived and born in a state of sinful degeneracy' be without sin in regard to the law of Adam? He quoted approvingly from Latimer:

"(Christ) saved us, not that we should be without sin; that no sin should be left in our hearts. No: he saved us not so. For all manner of imperfections remain in us, yea in the best of us. So that if God should enter into judgment with us we should be damned. For there neither is or was any man born into this world, who could say, I am clean from sin, except Jesus Christ."<sup>25</sup>

Fletcher readily accepted that believers could not fulfil the law of innocence<sup>26</sup> but a Heavenly Father would never demand from them in their debilitated condition paradisiacal or angelic perfection.<sup>27</sup> Of course, as Christ had completely fulfilled this law the believer would not be judged by it.<sup>28</sup>

However, this did not mean that the Christian was without law. There was another law called 'the law of Christ'. It could be found throughout the whole of the New Testament but was especially clear in the Sermon on the Mount and in (Paul's) 1 Corinthians 13.<sup>29</sup> Under this law the Heavenly Father did demand *perfection* from the believer.<sup>30</sup> This demand Fletcher argued, despite his opponents' claims, was not unrealistic because it was 'adapted to (the believers) present state and circumstances'<sup>31</sup> thus allowing that:

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<sup>25</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 417

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher stated: "Adamic perfection extended to the whole man; his body was perfectly sound in all its parts, and his soul in all its powers ...*Christian perfection* extends chiefly to the will, which is the capital moral power of the soul; leaving the understanding ignorant of a thousand things, and 'the body dead because of sin' *Christian Perfection* therefore comes to the believer from 'God in Christ as the God of grace' and was adapted to his or her present state and circumstances. *Ibid.*, p. 417

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418 f.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416 f.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418 f.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417



“although adult, established believers, or perfect Christians, may admit of many involuntary mistakes, errors, and faults; yet so long as their will is bent upon doing God’s will; so long as they walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit; so long as they fulfil the ‘law of liberty’ by pure love, they do not sin according to the gospel”.<sup>32</sup>

The Christian in this sense, therefore, could speak of being without sin for in the language of the First Epistle of John while<sup>33</sup> he or she ‘walks in the light as Christ is in the light’ he or she would, as Fletcher put it, be ‘evangelically sinless’. *Christian Perfection* then, to use the words of one of the pious Calvinists identified by Fletcher as an anonymous perfectionist,<sup>34</sup> was ‘imperfect perfection’.<sup>35</sup> That it was thought to be more, Fletcher believed played no small part in the controversy.

Further *Christian Perfection* should not be interpreted to mean that the power to sin was no longer an option for the believer. Fletcher maintained that the potential to sin must not be confused with the actual use of that potential otherwise death indeed would be the only ultimate escape from it. The fact that an adult believer, whose heart had been purified by faith from inbred sin, yielded to temptation did not disprove that his or her heart had been cleansed in the first place. Satan, after all, fell from celestial perfection and Adam also from paradisiacal perfection but this did not prove that

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<sup>32</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. V, p. 419

<sup>33</sup> Fletcher clearly sees this as a dynamic and not a static condition as the words ‘so long’ surely indicate. The same point is made when he states: “....he (God) is pleased with a humble obedience to our present light, and a loving exertion to our present powers; accepting our gospel services ‘according to what we have, and not according to what we have not’.” Ibid., p. 419

<sup>34</sup> Fletcher argues that Archbishop Leighton among others “could not but be a perfectionist” despite the fact that “as a Calvinist, he frequently spoke the language of the imperfectionists”. Fletcher points to his emphasis on love in the whole process of sanctification quoting Leighton as saying:

“By the love of God (the soul) is made divine.....though fallen from this, we are again invited to it; though degenerated and accursed in our sinful nature, yet we are renewed in Christ, and this commandment is renewed in him, and a new way of fulfilling it is pointed out”

Fletcher asks: ‘Where has Mr Wesley ever exceeded this high description of *Christian Perfection*?’ Ibid., p. 422 f.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 422



Adam or Satan had an inbuilt bias to corruption. Fletcher argued therefore that peccability must not be confused with indwelling sin.

Yet another area of confusion in the definition of *Christian Perfection* was the notion that it was in some way a terminus at which the believer having arrived, could regard herself or himself to be the finished article. Fletcher totally rejected any definition of *Christian Perfection* which suggested Absolute Perfection. Such perfection could only ever belong to God.<sup>36</sup> There was no holiness or happiness on earth, nor indeed in heaven, which did not admit of growth:

“..a ‘babe in Christ’ is called to grow till he becomes a perfect Christian; a perfect Christian, till he becomes a disembodied spirit; a disembodied spirit, till he reaches the perfection of a ‘saint glorified in body and soul’; and such a saint, till he has fathomed the infinite depths of divine perfection, that is, to all eternity”.<sup>37</sup>

Fletcher reasoned that if during the believer’s life on earth the transformation from ‘glory into glory’ was already taking place, even though he or she could only see God ‘darkly through a glass’, how much more the continuing transformation when the believer saw Him ‘face to face’. As Fletcher saw it, the only obstruction to growth was the presence of inbred sin which he described as the ‘shady thorns of sin’ and the ‘draining suckers of iniquity’.<sup>38</sup> However contradictory it might appear, the phrase ‘progressive perfection of grace’<sup>39</sup> was an accurate description of *Christian Perfection*.

### **Christian Perfection: the misconceptions**

Fletcher sought to dispel some of the most commonly held misconceptions

<sup>36</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. V, p. 426

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 423



about the doctrine by setting them against 'the true nature' of *Christian Perfection*.

To the complaint that in one way or another the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* would lead to pride, Fletcher replied it was impossible because *Christian Perfection*, if it meant anything, must mean 'perfect humility' and 'perfect charity'.<sup>40</sup> Thus any question that it by-passed the need for repentance or that it slighted the person of Christ was also absurd because it was 'perfect repentance' and 'perfect faith in Christ'.<sup>41</sup>

More plausible, according to Fletcher, was the objection which claimed, 'If sin is dead, what need have we to mortify it and to watch against it?' While it was true that the Christian was delivered from inbred sin, it was wrong to think that he or she was therefore no longer required to be vigilant against the triumvirate of the world, the flesh and the devil. If Christ was required to keep his human perfection through vigilance and continuing self-denial could the believer expect something less demanding than his Master? The Christian after all was called to walk 'in his steps'.<sup>42</sup> A variation on this objection suggested that it was illogical for perfect Christians to pray for forgiveness if God 'vouchsafes to keep us this day without sin'.<sup>43</sup>

Fletcher gave a fourfold response. Firstly, forgiveness must always be sought for the involuntary transgressions of the law of Adamic perfection. Secondly, it would be a foolish and arrogant person indeed who, aware of the coming Day of Judgment and of the need of final justification, did not consider it necessary to pray to the end of their life, 'Forgive us our trespasses.' Thirdly, surrounded as believers were by those 'who sin against us' it was salutary to be reminded that the receiving of forgiveness

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<sup>40</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 428 f.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

was dependent on the giving of forgiveness. Lastly, the perfect Christian could use the words vicariously enabling him or her to intercede with greater fervour for the rest of humanity.<sup>44</sup>

Another objection raised by the opponents of the doctrine of *Perfection* that without the continued presence of indwelling sin in the believer's life the strong motivation for humility would be lost. Fletcher rejected any such notion. True humility was the fruit of holiness and should never be credited to sin. While believers may be said to 'humbly repent of sin' this could never be interpreted to mean that sin was necessary for humility. To follow such thinking would be to go down the same path as those who said, 'Let us sin, that grace may abound' for as Fletcher reasoned what was really being said was, 'let us continue full of indwelling sin, that humility may increase.'<sup>45</sup>

The final difficulty with which Fletcher dealt was that the believer was indeed perfect, not in himself or herself but only in Christ. Fletcher feared the vagueness of this language. Such vagueness he contended might simply offer an excuse for an individual's slackness in the matter of inherent personal holiness allowing him or her to presume on the imputed righteousness of Christ. Fletcher accepted without question that *Christian Perfection* could only be attained and maintained by the believer being grafted into Christ through faith. But he also insisted that a proper consideration of scripture would support his contention that this relationship of imputed righteousness must in the very nature of things have an actual effect in the life of the believer. He stated:

" 'Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect' Who can read these words and not see, that the perfection which Christ preaches is a perfection of holy dispositions, productive of holy actions in all his followers? And that, of consequence, it is a personal perfection, as much

<sup>44</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 430 f

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432

inherent in us, and yet as much derived from him, and dependent upon him, as the perfection of our bodily health."<sup>46</sup>

Fletcher's declared aim was to avoid on the one hand the rock of 'Pharisaic running', a position which decried the Grace of God and the reality of imputed righteousness but on the other hand the rock of 'Antinomian sloth', a position which appeared to him to rest carelessly on imputed righteousness ignoring the need to 'go on to perfection.'

### **Christian Perfection: the objectors**

Having laid out his definition of *Christian Perfection* and cleared away what he considered to be the most common misconceptions with regard to the doctrine, Fletcher went on to deal with the main part of the controversy.

### ***Contrary to the teaching of the Church of England***

He began with the accusation that *Christian Perfection* ran contrary to the doctrine of the Church of England. Fletcher's opponents had argued that his views were at variance with the Ninth Article and the Fifteenth Article of the Church's creed. The Fifteenth Article stated:

"Christ in the truth of our nature, was made like unto us in all things (except sin) from which he was clearly void, both in his flesh and in his spirit. He came to be the lamb without spot, who by the sacrifice of himself once made, should take away the sins of the world: and sin (as Saint John says) was not in him. But all we the rest (although baptised and born again in Christ) yet offend in many things, and if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."<sup>47</sup>

It was the words, 'Christ alone without sin' which were seen as leaving no room for any doctrine of *Christian Perfection*. But Fletcher contended that these words suggested no such thing. He argued that the critics had misconstrued the purpose of the Article which had been simply to proclaim

<sup>46</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 436

<sup>47</sup> Noll, p. 218



Christ as the only one who was totally free from original and actual sin.<sup>48</sup> Therefore the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* was not in conflict with this Article. As already noted the Ninth Article stated:

"Original sin stands not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk) but it is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally are engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from the original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusts always contrary to the spirit, and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserves God's wrath and damnation. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them which are regenerated..."<sup>49</sup>

Here the issue revolved around the words, 'the infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated.' According to Fletcher some had denied the existence of original sin while others had suggested its removal through baptism.<sup>50</sup> It was these twin errors which the Church had sought to counter when it wrote the Ninth Article. But Fletcher's opponents saw the matter differently. As far as they were concerned, the Ninth Article gave the lie to any doctrine which held out the hope that indwelling sin could be removed before death. Fletcher, however, responded by pointing out that the removal of indwelling sin should not be understood as the total erasure of 'the poisonous seeds of mortality' associated with the body post-Paradise. In this sense the 'infection of nature' still remained.<sup>51</sup> What should be understood, however, was the victory that was available to the believer over:

".. the sinful lusts of the flesh, such as mental drunkenness, gluttony, whoredom, &c.; or .....unloving, diabolical tempers, such as envy, pride, stubbornness, malice, sinful anger, ungodly jealousy, unbelief, fretfulness, impatience, hypocrisy, revenge, or any moral opposition to the will of God;"<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 437

<sup>49</sup> Noll, p. 216 f.

<sup>50</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 438

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439 f.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 440



For him there could not be any conflict between what the Church taught its followers to believe and what it asked them to pray.<sup>53</sup> Listing a number of examples from the liturgy he concluded that the Church of England was not against the doctrine of evangelical perfection. Nevertheless, if the Church should at some points be found to be pleading for 'Christian imperfection and death purgatory' then the believer ought to recognise that there she was following the 'inconsistent Augustine' rather than the scriptures.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures***

Of course, it was a matter of debate as to whether the scriptures really supported the doctrine of *Christian Perfection*. Fletcher argued that the scriptures did but his opponents had countered this by claiming that the four Apostles, Peter, Paul, James and John supported the teaching of Christian imperfection and death purgatory.

#### Peter

Beginning with Peter, Fletcher asserted he could not find any place in either the first or second epistle where this Apostle supported the continued existence of indwelling sin in the believer's life. Indeed, while it might have been naturally introduced in the first epistle there was not even a hint of it.

#### James

With James right from the first chapter Fletcher claimed the reader was confronted by doctrine of *Christian Perfection* with the emphasis to seek it at all costs. It was as mistaken, therefore, to call James as a witness for the continued existence of indwelling sin in the life of the believer as it was to call Peter.

#### Paul

As for Paul, he was certainly a perfectionist. Fletcher argued that when Paul

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<sup>53</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 440

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 450

wrote, ‘..we speak wisdom among them that are perfect’<sup>55</sup> he was identifying himself as sharing with ‘fathers in Christ’ the experience of *Christian Perfection*. This was also true when he wrote to the Philippians, ‘Let us, as many as be perfect, be thus minded.’<sup>56</sup> Yet, as Paul's letters indicated this experience was not simply for a spiritual elite; it was for all believers.<sup>57</sup> Fletcher's opponents, however, had responded by pointing out that Paul in Philippians, far from claiming perfection for himself, had actually disclaimed any such perfection. He had said, ‘Not as though I had already attained or were already perfect.’ Fletcher believed that this contradiction was more apparent than real. He believed that the Apostle could not be so lacking as to contradict himself in the same chapter. He asserted that reason and scripture supported the idea that there were ‘various sorts and degrees of perfection.’ Therefore, the *perfection* which Paul sought was not the *perfection* of love which he had already experienced but the perfection of suffering and glory. So Fletcher put the two apparently contradictory statements together as follows:

“ ‘Let us, as many as are perfect, be thus minded’ he speaks of *Christian Perfection*, that is of the maturity of grace and holiness, which men still burdened with corruptible flesh and blood arrive at under the full dispensation of the gospel of Christ. But when he says, ‘Not as though I had already attained, or were already perfect’, he speaks of his perfection as a candidate for a ‘crown of martyrdom’ on earth, and for a ‘crown of glory’ in heaven.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet, if Paul really experienced this perfection of love, why did he plead for the ‘necessary continuance of indwelling sin in believers’ in the case of the

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<sup>55</sup> 1 Corinthians 2: 6 A.V.

<sup>56</sup> Philippians 3: 15 A.V.

<sup>57</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V p. 460. See 2 Corinthians 7: 1., 13: 11., 1 Corinthians 1: 6., 12: 31., Ephesians 4: 11 - 13., Colossians 1: 28., 4: 14., 5: 12., 2 Timothy 3: 17., Hebrews 5: 12 The matter of authorship was not in question as far as Fletcher was concerned.

<sup>58</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 470

Galatians?<sup>59</sup> Fletcher refused to allow any such understanding of Galatians. He contended that the letter, properly understood, was a call to immature fallen believers to 'crucify the flesh with all its affections and lusts' and walk in the Spirit.<sup>60</sup> In no way could the experience of these spiritually premature believers be made the standard for normal Christian living. Crucifying the flesh and walking in the Spirit would bring to the established believer the power and liberty which had been promised for normal Christian living.<sup>61</sup> It was ridiculous to use Paul's letter to the Galatians to defend the idea that he supported the continued presence of indwelling sin in the life of the believer.

However, if the fallen Galatians had not provided a good defence for the continued existence of indwelling sin surely Paul's own experience as he described it in Romans was incontrovertible evidence. In Romans Paul had stated:

"For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal sold under sin".<sup>62</sup>

To Fletcher's opponents this statement was proof positive that the great Apostle remained subject to the continued problem of indwelling sin. But again Fletcher rejected such an understanding. He believed that such an interpretation was contrary to the meaning and purpose of the whole epistle and totally out of context.<sup>63</sup> The words, 'carnal sold under sin' should be seen as 'a figurative mode of expression',<sup>64</sup> in which Paul related his past experience as a Jew in the present tense. Fletcher believed that while care must always be exercised when favouring the figurative sense over the

<sup>59</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI. p. 2. Here he quotes the statement from Galatians 5 : 17, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would".

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>62</sup> Romans 7: 14

<sup>63</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 19 f.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

literal the figurative use was not uncommon in other scriptures. Here the case was clearly justified. The whole thrust of the epistle celebrated the privileges of those who in Christ served God 'in the newness of the Spirit.' It would be absurd to consign the man who wrote of such liberty to the bondage of the seventh chapter. Fletcher's opponents, however, countered by arguing that Paul was really identifying the struggle for holiness which was to be found in every believer's life, a struggle destined to go on throughout the whole of life. Paul was at one and the same time 'eminent saint' and 'carnal wretched man.'<sup>65</sup> In his renewed self he was indeed a saint continuing to hunger after holiness. But in his unrenewed self he remained 'carnal and sold under sin' as the argument with Barnabas<sup>66</sup> illustrated. At least the indwelling sin did have some purpose in that it kept Paul humble.

But Fletcher would not accept any such attempts to fix what he called the 'yoke of carnality' upon the Apostle's neck. He believed his opponents were misrepresenting Paul by confusing Saul the Jew with Paul the Christian. Using a variety of quotations from Paul's writings he sought to illustrate what he saw as the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* superbly exemplified in the Apostle's attitudes and actions.<sup>67</sup>

However, if *Christian Perfection* was as clear in the scriptures as Fletcher said it was, why did good men still continue to defend the 'flesh-pleasing standard of Calvinian inconsistency and Christian imperfection'? Fletcher believed it was because of the 'mistaken fears' they had of endangering their humility and orthodoxy if they rejected what the Calvinian divines and St Augustine had affirmed.<sup>68</sup> This was despite the fact that in some of the

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<sup>65</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 22

<sup>66</sup> Acts 15: 36 ff.

<sup>67</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, pp. 31 - 34

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35



writings of these same Calvinian divines<sup>69</sup> the doctrine of perfection was seen as 'so true' and 'so excellent.' Indeed, Fletcher claimed that Augustine was on the side of the perfectionists when he kept to the 'scriptural line of moderation' and was not pushed to the extreme by the heat of controversy. According to Fletcher, Augustine had stated that the person in Romans 'sold under sin' was a man under 'the power of the law, who is yet a stranger to the liberty and power of Christ's gospel.'<sup>70</sup>

### John

The final Apostolic witness called to defend the case for the continuance of indwelling sin was John. Here, Fletcher claimed, it might have been no less ridiculous to present Satan as a friend of holiness than to say John was an enemy of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>71</sup> The key text in the argument was:

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us".<sup>72</sup>

According to Fletcher, his opponents saw this statement as irrefutable scriptural evidence for the continued existence of indwelling sin in the life of the believer. But Fletcher believed this could only be so if the context was ignored. The statement in its context read:

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."<sup>73</sup>

Considered within its context verse 8 must surely be understood differently otherwise the inspired writer could be accused of being inconsistent and

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<sup>69</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 35. Fletcher identifies Whitefield and Romaine.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 35

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 50

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>73</sup> 1 John 1 : 7 - 9



contradictory.<sup>74</sup> To confine the promise of cleansing to justification alone was, in Fletcher's mind, a totally inadequate exegesis. It must surely apply to sanctification and holiness as well.<sup>75</sup> Nor would he accept the compromise suggestion that the verses offered the possibility of a partial cleansing from indwelling sin, the completion being experienced in a 'death-purgatory'. Apart from anything else such an interpretation poured 'contempt on Christ's blood'.<sup>76</sup> For Fletcher then the only interpretation which gave full expression to the meaning in verses 7 and 9 was that which offered the possibility of freedom from indwelling sin. How then should verse 8 be understood? Fletcher believed it was aimed at 'pharisaic professors... who had never been properly convinced of sin...' So he paraphrased it as follows:

" 'If we' ( followers of him who came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance) 'say we have no sin', ( no native depravity from our first parents, and no actual sin, at least sin as deserves God's wrath, fancying we need not secure a particular application of Christ's atoning and purifying blood,) 'we deceive ourselves, and the truth' of repentance and faith 'is not in us'. "<sup>77</sup>

Therefore, Fletcher's opponents' choice of John as the final witness in the case for the continuance of indwelling sin in the life of the believer was in his opinion an unhappy one. Fletcher suggested his opponents might have been better served had they, for example, chosen Solomon<sup>78</sup> instead of John though even here he thought the passages used might also bear another interpretation.<sup>79</sup> Of course, to compare the state of believers in the Old Testament with that of those in the New was unfair for the 'full measure of the Spirit' was not available until after Christ's Ascension. It was this gift

<sup>74</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 46

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52 f. He quotes from Solomon's prayer in the Temple as it is recorded in 1 Kings 8 : 46 " If they sin against thee ( for there is no man that sinneth not)....."

<sup>79</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, pp. 52 -58

of the fullness of the Spirit which made the privileges of the Christian dispensation superior to those of the Jewish dispensation.

### **Christian Imperfection: the absurdities**

Fletcher went on the offensive against what he called the 'doctrine of Christian Imperfection and its death purgatory'. He sought to highlight what to him was the absurdity of retaining indwelling sin until the moment of death.

Paul had written in Hebrews that 'without holiness no man shall see the Lord.'<sup>80</sup> In Fletcher's opinion this could mean nothing else than that 'no one can go to a holy and just God without first being made just and holy'. Of course this did not of itself disprove the idea that the cleansing actually took place at death but what did was the fact that Paul went on to speak in the same chapter of the 'spirits of just men made perfect.'<sup>81</sup> Fletcher reasoned that as the Apostle referred to 'the spirits of just men' and not to 'the perfected spirits of just men'<sup>82</sup> the cleansing must have occurred on earth.

Again, it would be incredible that Christ should fault the Pharisees for ignoring their own inward condition in favour of outward ritual purity if he could not deal with the inward pollution of the heart himself. Fletcher believed that on the contrary Christ's promised blessing for the 'pure in heart' and his offer of 'freedom' to all could mean nothing less than purity and freedom from indwelling corruption in the here and now. Anything short of this would have meant that Christ had had to call death to his assistance and this would have been absurd. He had been able to bind the 'strong man' but unable to cast him out. Fletcher suggested that if this was all there was on offer then, as with the swine in the Gospel story, suicide by way of

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<sup>80</sup> Hebrews 12: 14

<sup>81</sup> Hebrews 12: 23

<sup>82</sup> **Fletcher's Works**, Vol. VI, p. 59

the 'first pond' should be the next logical step. But the whole strategy of the New Covenant inaugurated by Christ ran counter to such a view. It promised a radical change from within for God had said 'I will put my laws in their minds, and write them in their hearts.'<sup>83</sup> If God did this, Fletcher maintained, there would be no room left for the 'hellish statutes of Satan'. Just as the original righteousness of Adam had been radically destroyed by Satan and replaced by unrighteousness so Christ's gospel would similarly overturn and displace all the unrighteousness.

In Fletcher's mind, it did not make sense to say that 'grace much more abounds' if sin still lurked in the heart of the believer until the moment of death. This, to Fletcher's way of thinking, did a great dishonour to God. He reasoned, if it was acceptable for God to offer forgiveness to the truly repentant sinner right up to the moment of death, then it should not be any more dishonourable for the same God to cleanse the truly repentant believer any moment before death.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, if faith and love could be made perfect two or three minutes before death then why not, two or three weeks, or two or three years?<sup>85</sup>

Of course, it seemed strange to Fletcher to even want to put off the experience of *Christian Perfection* until the moment of death. Describing it as:

"..the depth of evangelical repentance, the full assurance of faith, and the pure love of God and man shed abroad in a faithful believer's heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him, to cleanse him and to keep him clean 'from all filthiness of flesh and spirit' and to enable him to fulfil the law of Christ', according to the talents he is entrusted with, and the circumstances in which he is placed in this world;"<sup>86</sup>

he saw postponement as ludicrous and contrary to the teaching of the call

<sup>83</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 6

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62 f.

to holiness in the New Testament. Indeed, the blessedness offered in the beatitudes and Christ's many calls to live out the counter culture of his Kingdom was nothing other than *Christian Perfection* and could really only make sense in an earthly context. Likewise, Paul's exhortations to follow a Christ-like life style aiming particularly at love were for this world and would not make sense in the setting of death.<sup>87</sup> Fletcher concluded, therefore, if the scriptures recommended a holy life, the Christian should not wait for the 'filthy hands of death'<sup>88</sup> to purify his or her heart from all that is unholy. This indeed was absurd.

### **Christian Imperfection: the dangers**

Turning from the absurdities of the doctrine of Christian imperfection and death purgatory Fletcher looked at the dangers.

He saw them as an attack at the very heart of the Reformation in that, in his opinion, they denied salvation by faith. He reasoned that, if inbred sin remained until death, Paul's words must be amended to read, 'By grace are ye saved from the remains of sin through death'.<sup>89</sup> Satan then would be able to boast that his work of death effected the deliverance from sin and not faith! Such thinking struck at the very heart of the gospel, dishonouring the Person and Work of Christ. Fletcher maintained that Christ as prophet taught the believer to be 'meek and lowly in heart' but, if indwelling sin remained until death, so too, would pride and unrestrained anger. This would be a denial of what Jesus had taught and therefore a dishonour to His person and work. As King, Christ had the right to the throne of the

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<sup>87</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 65. So, for example, Fletcher sees Paul's call to the Romans to, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice; and be not conformed to this present world, that ye may prove what is that perfect will of God" (Romans 12 : 1 f.) as a call applicable to the living and nothing short of a call to *Christian Perfection*.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71



human heart but, if indwelling sin remained until death, He could not be said to reign supreme until the 'king of terrors' evicted the usurper. This would be an insult to the King of Kings. Again Christ as priest pleaded the merits of His own sacrifice for the cleansing of all 'unrighteousness' that the believer might be 'perfected in one' but, if indwelling sin remained until death, ultimately death itself could only bring such perfection. This was totally unscriptural and placed the work of Christ in a contemptible light.<sup>90</sup> Christian imperfection then was a very dangerous teaching. Of course, it might be argued that the teaching of *Christian Perfection* was equally dishonouring to Christ for it made His priesthood redundant. Fletcher denied this and in essence argued that none 'make so much use of Christ's blood as perfect Christians'.<sup>91</sup>

Again, if indwelling sin remains until death it must co-exist, albeit with restraint, alongside the promised indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>92</sup> Fletcher objected to this on the grounds that the 'Spirit could never take constant abode in a heart full of indwelling sin' for, while indwelling sin remained, the Spirit must act as a reprover and not as a comforter. Yet Christ had promised the Spirit's permanent presence as the Father's gift in his absence. It seemed to Fletcher therefore, that if the Holy Spirit could offer the believer nothing more than a restraining power for indwelling sin, it must be concluded that Christ had failed in his promise as 'the sender of the indwelling, abiding comforter' who brought fullness of joy to all believers. Indeed, if Christ had failed to deliver on this promise, then the

<sup>90</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 71

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74. Fletcher reasons Christ's blood is a 'preservative from the infection of sin' as well as a 'reviving cordial' to encourage in the battle with Satan. So the perfect Christian does not see the blood of Christ as a medicine to be taken now and then when he or she has a need of forgiveness for some specific sin. Rather there is no moment the perfect Christian can be without it. The Blood of Christ "constantly speaks before God, and in their conscience, 'better things than the blood of Abel', and actually procures for them all the blessings which they enjoy or expect."



believer could be no more hopeful about other promises in scripture being fulfilled. With faith thus robbed of its impetus the believer must surely regard as meaningless the petition, 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' or the prayer 'cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name.'<sup>93</sup> Fletcher argued that such conclusions were extremely discouraging and dangerous.

### **Christian Imperfection: the defence**

Having set out some of the dangers of the doctrine of Christian Imperfection Fletcher then took up some of the arguments he said were used to defend it.

#### ***The acknowledged existence of short-comings in the lives of even the most saintly***

Highlighting the fact that all believers have at the very least short-comings in their lives and are thus imperfect, Fletcher's opponents pointed to what appeared as an obvious contradiction in any claim to *perfection*.<sup>94</sup> But he countered by maintaining that the scriptures and nature showed that 'men and things may be perfect in one sense and imperfect in another'.<sup>95</sup>

*Christian Perfection* was a relative *perfection*.

#### ***The usefulness of sin in the life of the believer***

However, according to Fletcher, the main defence for Christian Imperfection was made on the grounds of the continued usefulness of sin.<sup>96</sup> It was argued that without the continued presence of indwelling sin the believer's patience and industry would not be fully exercised. For Fletcher the fundamental weakness in this argument was its failure to fully reckon with

<sup>93</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 78

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85 f.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82

the power of God;<sup>97</sup> a failure which he noted did not extend to his opponents' understanding of irresistible grace.<sup>98</sup> As Fletcher saw it, his opponents believed that the continuance of indwelling sin in the believer's life actually magnified the power of God in that it was God's power which supported the believer in the conflict.<sup>99</sup> What better way to discover the strength of grace than the need to call upon it.<sup>100</sup> It was also argued that the conflict with sin encouraged the believer to long for the 'land of rest' with a greater intensity.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, the situation magnified the wisdom of God in that it enabled the believer to see clearly the beauty of grace<sup>102</sup> and loathsomeness of sin.<sup>103</sup> Fletcher rejected these arguments entirely, believing them to be solely inspired by an Antinomian gospel. For him it was the same as saying, 'continue in sin that grace may abound'<sup>104</sup> and such a suggestion had been firmly repudiated by Paul long ago. It did not make the argument any more amenable to him by saying that although the two natures existed side by side, despite the sinfulness of the flesh, the divine nature remained unsullied.<sup>105</sup> Fletcher maintained that the Son of God 'was manifested to destroy the works of the devil',<sup>106</sup> therefore to accept anything less than the destruction of sin was dishonouring to Christ. He wrote,

"...(the) argument in favour of death purgatory is contrary .....to Christianity, and to the honour of him who to the uttermost saves his believing people from their heart-toads, and bosom-vipers, when they go to him for this great salvation!"<sup>107</sup>

<sup>97</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 83

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97 -99

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99 f.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94

<sup>104</sup> Romans 6: 1

<sup>105</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 102 f.

<sup>106</sup> I John 3: 8. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 83

<sup>107</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 84

### ***The orthodoxy of Christian Imperfection***

The doctrine of Christian imperfection was also defended by questioning the credibility of *Christian Perfection* as an evangelical doctrine. It was claimed that the emphasis of *Christian Perfection* on personal *perfection* through obedience rather than imputed *perfection* through faith was more in keeping with Roman Catholic or even Pelagian teaching than scriptural teaching.<sup>108</sup> Fletcher countered this attack by arguing that the call to obedience which the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* emphasised was abundantly clear throughout the scriptures. He began with the *Shema*:

" Hear O Israel: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thy heart..<sup>109</sup>

He argued that these words were not a counsel of despair given in order to drive the Jewish people to their promised Messiah who would ultimately fulfil the words on their behalf.<sup>110</sup> These words were rather a call to a perfection of love appropriate to the Jewish dispensation and attainable by every sincere Jew who was obedient to that call.<sup>111</sup> Fletcher believed this interpretation was strongly supported by the context. If this were true in the Jewish dispensation, how much more true would it be in the Christian dispensation? It would be absurd to say that the Christian dispensation would require any 'less perfection' or indeed make any 'less provision' than the Jewish dispensation. Jesus himself had implied a greater perfection of love when in the context of the Sermon on the Mount he had said, 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law and the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil...'.<sup>112</sup> Fletcher reasoned that the work of Christ on the

<sup>108</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 105

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. quote from Deuteronomy 6: 4-6

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 107 f.

<sup>112</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 108. quote from Matthew 5: 17

Cross would 'raise the exquisitely-delicious fruit of Perfect Love to a greater perfection, than the gospel which Moses preached'<sup>113</sup> thus enabling the believer to discover an 'evangelically-sinless perfection' in which he or she would never wilfully disobey Christ's commandments.<sup>114</sup> He concluded therefore that the gospel of Christ was 'not a wanton lawless gospel but a holy lawful gospel, in which evangelical promises are properly guarded by evangelical rules of judgment ...'<sup>115</sup> This view he maintained was confirmed by the testimonies of Paul and James.<sup>116</sup> The choice then was clear:

"Thou must wrap thyself up in the unscriptural notions of imputed righteousness, imputed holiness, and imputed obedience, which make up the ideal garment of the Calvinistically imputed perfection; or thou must perfectly wash in the blood of the Lamb thy robes of inherent, though derived, righteousness, holiness, and obedience, which when they are thus washed, are the rich wedding garment of evangelical perfection."<sup>117</sup>

The evangelical credibility of *Christian Perfection* was further questioned in the light of the distinction made between 'sins' and 'infirmities'. Such teaching, it was argued, owed its origin to the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>118</sup> No true Protestant could build his or her belief on such an unsound source. In response Fletcher called on both the Old and New Testament to prove that the scriptures were the real source of what he saw as the clear distinction between 'wilful sin and infirmities, or involuntary offences.'<sup>119</sup> He stated therefore:

"If to make a distinction between sins and infirmities, constitutes a man half a papist, it is evident that St Paul was not less tainted with popery, so called, than David, Moses, and Jesus Christ,"<sup>120</sup>

<sup>113</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 110

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111 - 115

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119 - 121

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121



Alongside the scriptural evidence he placed the witness of the Church of England and the writings of John Newton, who he believed brought honour to the name of Calvinism. Quoting from Newton's published work, Fletcher showed that this 'judicious Calvinist' made the same distinction as he did with regard to 'wilful sin' and 'involuntary mistakes'.<sup>121</sup> In respect to the Church, Fletcher pointed to its litany as it instructed its members to pray, 'that it may please God to forgive us all our sins, negligences, and ignorances'.<sup>122</sup> If no distinction was to be made between 'sins, negligences, and ignorances' the use of the three different words was superfluous. However, if a distinction between sin and infirmity was to be made, where should the line be drawn? Fletcher attempted to show where the line should be drawn by saying:

" An infirmity, considering it with the error which it occasions, is consistent with pure love to God and man; but a sin is inconsistent with that love: an infirmity is free from guile, and has its roots in our animal frame; but a sin is attended with guile and has its roots in our moral frame, springing either from the habitual corruption of our heart, or from the momentary perversion of our tempers: an infirmity unavoidably results from our unhappy circumstances, and from the necessary infelicities of our present state; but a sin flows from the avoidable and perverse choice of our own will: an infirmity has its foundation in an involuntary want of light and power; and a sin is a wilful abuse of the present light and power we have."<sup>123</sup>

Sin in the Christian dispensation, therefore, must not be measured according to the standard which had been required of Adam but rather according to Christ's evangelical law of perfection.

In setting this line Fletcher believed he had avoided the extremes of Pelagius and Augustine. According to the Adamic law of perfection, the adult Christian was still a sinner and therefore imperfect. Pelagius had

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<sup>121</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 122

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124



wrongly contended for a paradisiacal perfection. Augustine in emphasising the inability of humankind to act with freedom because of original sin had been right to oppose him. However, Augustine had gone too far when he maintained that ‘..we must sin as long as we are in the body’.<sup>124</sup> Here he had failed to see the distinction between the law of paradise and the law of Christ. Fletcher believed that whereas it was not possible to obey the ‘Creator’s law of strict justice’,<sup>125</sup> it was possible to live in obedience to the evangelical law of Christ and therefore in that sense be perfect.

***The consistency of Christian imperfection with “gradual” sanctification.***

Fletcher concluded what he called the ‘argumentative part of this essay’<sup>126</sup> by responding to Matthew Henry’s argument for ‘gradual’ sanctification.<sup>127</sup> According to Fletcher, his argument rested on at least two seriously flawed suppositions. The first was that sin must remain in order for the Christian to learn war. He quoted Matthew Henry:

“Corruption is left remaining in the heart of good Christians, that they may learn war, may keep on the whole armour of God, and stand continually upon their guard”.<sup>128</sup>

Fletcher considered this as absurd. He reckoned that the world, the flesh, and the devil as well as death gave the believer enough experience of war without the added conflict of the civil war of inbred sin. He also pointed out that in this instance the textual support<sup>129</sup> used to defend the gradual removal of inbred sin was founded on a very weak inference. The second

<sup>124</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. VI, p. 126

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p.131 f. The references to which Fletcher refers his readers in Matthew Henry are Deuteronomy 7: 22; Judges 3: 1,4; Galatians 5: 17. At the Deuteronomy 7: 22 Henry comments: ‘God will do his own work in his own method and time, and we may be sure that they are always the best. Thus corruption is driven out of the hearts of believers by little and little. The work of sanctification is carried on gradually..’. Church, L. F., (ed) *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1960], p. 183

<sup>128</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. VI, p. 130

<sup>129</sup> Deuteronomy 7 : 22

supposition, and in Fletcher's mind no less absurd, was that the removal of indwelling sin might only serve to increase 'pride, and security, and other sins'.<sup>130</sup> To Fletcher it was a strange logic which suggested that the removal of pride might only increase pride. Furthermore, if God, in a moment, could and must deal with inbred sin for someone who died suddenly, then it was absurd to stick rigidly to 'little by little' for the living. The sinner could believe in a moment if God helped him or her to believe. Fletcher, therefore, rejected the argument that the battle with inbred sin could never be completed without a long and gradual process.<sup>131</sup>

### **The Practical**

In this part of the essay Fletcher addresses in practical terms four groups of people identified as:

- Perfect Pharisees
- Prejudiced Imperfectionists
- Imperfect Believers
- Perfect Christians

### **Perfect Pharisees**

In essence Fletcher defined the Perfect Pharisee as the person who clearly and readily professes to follow the way of *Christian Perfection* but behind the appearance and the language there was really no reality. Fletcher believed such people had been deceived by Satan:

“..artfully led to a profession of *Christian Perfection*, through a circle of external performances, through glorious forms of doctrine in the letter, and through a fair show of zeal for complete holiness..”<sup>132</sup>

<sup>130</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 130

<sup>131</sup> Fletcher's rejection of gradual sanctification here is a rejection of the position represented in Matthew Henry and not a rejection of a gradual sanctification per se.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135

Despite the language and appearances, the way they lived made any testimony to perfection untenable. God, therefore, had given them over to self delusion and Fletcher warned them to wake up before it was too late. He was also concerned to point out the effects of their inconsistency on the lives of others. On the one hand, the 'budding faith of sincere perfectionists' was being destroyed, and on the other hand, the unbelief of the Imperfectionists was being strengthened.<sup>133</sup> He concluded by calling on these Perfect Pharisees not to abandon the doctrine of an 'evangelical sinless holiness' but rather that of 'pharisaic holiness'. It was more a question of the heart than of the lips.<sup>134</sup>

### **Prejudiced Imperfectionists**

Fletcher appealed directly to those who pleaded for the necessary continuance of indwelling sin in the heart of all true Christians. He believed there really were no grounds for such pleading. Certainly there were no grounds provided in any of the confessions or sacramental offices of the Church.<sup>135</sup> As Fletcher saw it, from baptism to ordination the declared aim contained in the liturgies was the abolition of the 'whole body of sin' not its containment. Contrary to the view that a radical cure for inbred sin was dishonouring to the Saviour, Fletcher argued the very opposite was the case! How could Christ be portrayed as the keeper and not the 'destroyer of our corruptions'?<sup>136</sup> Such a suggestion implied not only inconsistency in Christ but also inconsistency in the whole Trinity. The Father had given the Son to be crucified that sin might be destroyed. The Son as the Saviour had offered to make us free. The Holy Spirit as sanctifier had been pledged

<sup>133</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 137 f.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142 f.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143

to make the work of the cross real in the heart of the believer. Fletcher argued, to go on maintaining 'a heart partly evil to the last'<sup>137</sup> against such affirmation, would be totally inconsistent. He went on to point out what would be lost if the way of *Christian Perfection* was not followed and what might be gained if it was.

By earnestly aiming at the goal of *Christian Perfection*, the believer would grow stronger in confidence of his or her Christian standing. The opposite would be the case for those who did not make it their goal. Fletcher insisted that anyone who broke Christ's evangelical law was condemned in their own conscience and therefore could not enjoy the full assurance of faith which belonged to the way of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>138</sup> Friendship with God resulting in remarkable answers to prayer was another characteristic of the perfect Christian.<sup>139</sup> But the 'lovers of imperfection' were debarred from such intimate communion.<sup>140</sup> Fletcher further contended that perfect Christians brought more glory to God and were better members of society than imperfect Christians.<sup>141</sup> In relation to heaven, as the whole tenor of scripture said 'nothing that defiles' would enter it, this must mean that the imperfect Christian was not really prepared for heaven. This, however, did not mean that imperfect Christians were in a 'damnable state'. Fletcher maintained that:

"so long as a Christian believer sincerely presses after *Christian Perfection*, he is safe..But if a believer falls, loiters, and rests upon former experiences, depending upon a self-made, pharisaical perfection, or upon a self-imputed, antinomian perfection; our chief message to him is that of St. Paul: 'Awake, thou that sleepest, awake to righteousness, and sin not..' Otherwise thou shalt share the dreadful fate of the lukewarm

<sup>137</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 145

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146 f.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148 f.

Laodiceans, and of the foolish virgins, 'whose lamps went out'”<sup>142</sup>

However, for the perfect Christian, heaven was something not only to be enjoyed after death; it could also be known here on the earth. For possessing as they did the kingdom of God within, the perfect Christian would experience 'righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost' now on this earth, something which could only be described as 'a gracious heaven' in his or her 'own soul'.<sup>143</sup> Such happiness was lost to those who continued to be imperfect Christians.

Fletcher speculated as to what might happen were imperfect Christians to escape damnation and find themselves in heaven. He wondered where they would be, certainly not, he thinks, in the 'glorious mansions of the perfect Christians'. Would it then be among the perfect Jews or the perfect Heathens? He wished that it might be so but he perceived there would be a problem. The perfect Jew and the perfect Heathen were according to their light, guileless but the imperfect Christian was not because he or she still held on to 'indwelling sin'.<sup>144</sup> He admonished the imperfect Christian not to rest on such hopes but with 'evangelical striving' to aim at 'one of the first seats in glory'.<sup>145</sup> Fletcher insisted that the whole doctrine of 'indwelling sin' and 'imputed perfection' rested upon two of the most deadly and misleading principles ever uttered.

First, it taught that sin could not ultimately destroy the Christian either in this life or the next.<sup>146</sup> As Fletcher saw it, this conclusion encouraged the false and easy assurance that all was well and that sin did not need to be resisted. Yet in holding on to 'indwelling sin' the Christian had 'one of the

<sup>142</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 150

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151 f.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152



sharpest stings of death, and one of the hottest coals in hell-fire'<sup>147</sup> remaining still in his or her heart.

Secondly, it taught that in this world sin could never be destroyed.<sup>148</sup> This conclusion, in Fletcher's mind, could only create despair. Yet it did not have to be so, because as Fletcher saw it, *Christian Perfection* provided the answer. For he maintained it was possible to know:

"...the last feature of Belial's image erased from your loving souls, the last bit of the sting of death extracted from your composed breasts, the last spark of hell-fire extinguished in your peaceful bosoms."<sup>149</sup>

In practical terms he further defined that this meant that the believer would:

"...enter into the spiritual rest which remains on earth for the people of God; a delightful rest this, where your soul will enjoy a calm in the midst of outward storms; and where your spirit will no longer be tossed by the billows of swelling pride, dissatisfied avarice, pining envy, disappointed hopes, fruitless cares, dubious anxiety, turbulent anger, fretting impatience, and racking unbelief. It is to enjoy that even state of mind, in which all things will work together for your good. There your love will bear its excellent fruits during the sharpest winter of afflictions, as well as in the finest summer of prosperity. There you will be more settled in peaceful humility: there you will continually grow in an holy familiarity with the Friend of penitent sinners; and your prospect of eternal felicity will brighten every day."<sup>150</sup>

Fletcher ended this section with a call to the 'prejudiced imperfectionists' to admit that really the 'most excellent Christian is a consistent, holy perfectionist'.<sup>151</sup>

### **Imperfect Believers**

Fletcher sought to give some direction to those who had not yet discovered the way of *Christian Perfection*; he wanted the directions to be both

<sup>147</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 153

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 152

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 153

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 153 f.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 156

scriptural and rational.

***The Biblical basis: 'precept and promise'***

He began by pointing out the biblical basis of what he called the 'precept and promise' of an 'evangelically-sinless perfection' and of the importance of the seeker resting his or her faith on such a foundation.<sup>152</sup> Using the Old and the New Testaments he cited various scriptures which, on the one hand commanded the believer to walk in the way of *Christian Perfection* and, on the other hand, promised the power to achieve such a walk. For example he cited the commands,

"Hear, O Israel: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."<sup>153</sup>

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."<sup>154</sup>

Fletcher regarded these as clear calls to *Christian Perfection*. But alongside these commands were such promises as:

"The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live."<sup>155</sup>

"This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, says the Lord, I will put my laws in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people."<sup>156</sup>

"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will put away the heart of stone out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them."<sup>157</sup>

<sup>152</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 158

<sup>153</sup> Deuteronomy 6 : 4-5. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 158

<sup>154</sup> Matthew 5 : 48. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 159

<sup>155</sup> Deuteronomy 30 : 6. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 160

<sup>156</sup> Jeremiah 31 : 33. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 160 f.

<sup>157</sup> Ezekiel 34 : 25 - 27. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 161

These promises offered faith the much needed strength with which to obey the commands. Of course, while such promises did belong to and were experienced in some measure by the Jews, they could not be fully realised until the Christian dispensation. Fletcher pointed out, citing Wesley<sup>158</sup> in his support, that the complete fulfilment of these promises awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit. He interpreted the words in John's gospel in this light when Jesus is recorded as saying:

".. 'If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink. He that believeth on me out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water' But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him shall receive; for the Holy Ghost was not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified".<sup>159</sup>

Fletcher believed this promise was central to the whole experience of perfect Christianity. When this promise had been fulfilled at Pentecost the power of the Spirit was such that people had not only been converted and justified but also had been brought into the 'state of *Christian Perfection*'. This he maintained occurred subsequent<sup>160</sup> to the events recorded in Acts 2 when there had been 'another glorious baptism, or capital outpouring of the Spirit' where at least some<sup>161</sup> of those who had been converted were enabled to go on to the 'Canaan of Perfect Love'. Fletcher was convinced

<sup>158</sup> **Fletcher's Works**, Vol. VI, p. 162. Fletcher quotes from the *Plain Account* where Wesley writes, "Has there not been a larger measure of the Holy Spirit given under the gospel, than under the Jewish dispensation? If not, in what sense was 'the Spirit not given' before Christ was 'glorified'?"

<sup>159</sup> John 7 : 37. quoted in **Fletcher's Works**, p. 162

<sup>160</sup> Acts 4 : 31-33. Fletcher saw this as the 'second capital manifestation of the Holy Spirit' which 'carried believers farther into the kingdom of grace'. This he contended was an answer to Christ's High Priestly prayer that believers 'might be perfected in one' and was indeed *Christian Perfection*. see: **Fletcher's Works**, p. 165

<sup>161</sup> Fletcher cautions his readers with regard to how they should understand Luke's account of the believers oneness of 'heart and mind' and 'having all things common'. He states: "while many of them were perfect in love, many might have the imperfection of their love only covered over by a land- flood of 'peace and joy in believing'. As subsequent events were to show, this was of course the case. However, Fletcher did also suggest that, as it was the beginning of the dispensation of the Spirit, God might indeed have allowed all the believers to experience temporarily *Christian Perfection* even though all were not actually settled in the experience. **Fletcher's Works**, p. 166 f.

that what had happened in the early church in terms of 'the peculiar power of the Spirit' was illustrative of what could still happen.<sup>162</sup> He stated:

"..this power, through faith on our part, can operate the most sudden and surprising change in our souls; and that when our faith shall fully embrace the promise of full sanctification, or of a complete circumcision of the heart in the Spirit, the Holy Ghost, who kindled so much love on the day of pentecost, that all the primitive believers loved, or seem to love, each other perfectly, will not fail to help us to 'love one another' without sinful self-seeking; and as soon as we do so 'God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us'".<sup>163</sup>

This did not mean, however, that to be effective such cleansing must always have two baptisms of the Spirit. Fletcher allowed that one 'powerful baptism of the Spirit' might well have effected the work. He accepted the possibility that some who had been newly justified might also, in that same moment, have been 'perfected in love'. Nevertheless he believed that in general, because the believer only discovered the problem of indwelling sin gradually, such cases would be more the exception than the rule.<sup>164</sup>

Fletcher, however, did not see any scriptural warrant to restrict the experience to two stages. He maintained that 'the operations of the Holy Ghost and the energy of faith'<sup>165</sup> could not be confined to a set rule. Indeed, even after having been 'perfected in love' there would still be a gradual ongoing work taking place in the life of the believer. So if in the first instance 'two or more' baptisms of the Spirit were needed, it did not matter because God was able to repeat it until, as in the treatment for constipation, the remedy had 'fully answered the desired end'.<sup>166</sup> What was important in Fletcher's mind was that the believer would see the way to *Christian Perfection* was 'by the word of the gospel of Christ, by faith and by the Spirit

<sup>162</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 167

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168 f. Fletcher quotes here with approval from the *Plain Account*.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167 f



of God'.<sup>167</sup>

### **A basic requirement**

Secondly Fletcher stressed the importance of having a fairly clear idea of what *Christian Perfection* was if ever the seeker was to experience it.<sup>168</sup>

Some had ideas of *Christian Perfection* which were far too high while others had ideas which were certainly too low. Consequently the believer was either driven to despair or allowed to become complacent. Fletcher was convinced that his description of *Perfection* had set the standard according to scriptures.

### **A 'restless' resignation**

In finding the way to *Christian Perfection* the imperfect believer might well be in doubt as to whether it was all of grace or whether it required personal effort. For Fletcher it was not a case of 'either/or' but 'both/and' where the believer would wait in a union of 'prevenient, assisting free grace, and assisted free will'.<sup>169</sup> He pointed to the words in Philippians,

" ....work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."<sup>170</sup>

Here the passive faith of the believer in the active grace of God saved him or her from pharisaism while the active faith saved him or her from antinomianism. It was as Wesley described it:

" Restless, resigned, for God I wait;  
For God my vehement soul stands still"<sup>171</sup>

Fletcher saw this as the scriptural way of waiting on God for the blessing of *Christian Perfection*.

<sup>167</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 170

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169 f.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170 f.

<sup>170</sup> Philippians 2 : 12 c - 13. referred to in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 171

<sup>171</sup> quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 171



### **A 'gradual' or an 'instantaneous' way**

Fletcher dealt with the question of whether or not *Christian Perfection* was to be received instantaneously or gradually. While he maintained that the instantaneous experience of *Christian Perfection* was neither unreasonable nor unscriptural he believed both ways were good. He encouraged the believer to seek *Christian Perfection* now by fully exercising his or her faith in the 'promise of that perfection'. Yet, in the meantime, that same believer by repeated acts of obedience should continue to work with diligence towards perfection as if everything depended on working at it. In following these directions, Fletcher believed, the Christian would, as in the previous point, avoid the way of the pharisees and of the antinomians.<sup>172</sup>

### **A good resolve**

Fletcher continued this attack on what he called 'antinomian sloth'<sup>173</sup> and 'pharisaic running'<sup>174</sup> by encouraging the believer to make good resolutions. He argued that the believer should have a firm resolve to get to the 'Canaan of Perfect Love'.<sup>175</sup> There was nothing wrong with making good resolutions.<sup>176</sup> Some, it was true, had attempted to walk with God by leaning too much on their own free will and they had failed. Then, instead of finding the way of moderation, they had gone to the opposite extreme by over stressing grace at the expense of free will. Fletcher regarded it quite simply as a matter of balance: depending on the 'strength of free grace' while at the same time exercising one's own 'assisted free will'.<sup>177</sup> He claimed that if the person who had resolved to 'go on to perfection' would do this he or she would avoid the rocks of useless striving and careless sloth.

<sup>172</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 178

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180

'Resolve to be perfect **in** yourselves, but **not of** yourselves' was Fletcher's advice.<sup>178</sup> Such advice, if adhered to, would keep the believer from being deceived by the twin delusions of imputed perfection and 'self-originated' *perfection*. On the one hand it was totally unscriptural to suggest that holiness in the believer's life could never be anything more than a holiness by proxy. How else could Paul's prayer for the people at Philippi to 'be filled with the fruits of righteousness'<sup>179</sup> be interpreted other than as prayer for righteousness to be imparted? Why would David ask God for the creation of a clean heart within him if purity was only a matter of covering?<sup>180</sup> Had not Peter stated, 'If these things be in you, and abound, ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of Christ'?<sup>181</sup> Of course, on the other hand, what was equally disturbing was the slightest hint of any suggestion that a Christian could ever have righteousness simply by his or her own striving. Fletcher acknowledged that some 'proud Christians' had actually been guilty of such claims when they had boasted of 'what they had received as if they had not received it'.<sup>182</sup> They also had been guilty of using what they had received without that humble sense of dependence constantly required of such gifts of God's grace.<sup>183</sup> According to Fletcher, the only antidote for this 'horrid delusion' was a true recognition of one's own impotence and God's sufficient grace.<sup>184</sup>

### ***A deep repentance***

Repentance was also an important process for those who were sincerely seeking *Christian Perfection*. Fletcher called for a thorough going repentance which would leave no inward or outward sin 'unrepented of,

<sup>178</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 181

<sup>179</sup> Philippians 1: 11. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 182

<sup>180</sup> Psalm 51:10. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 182

<sup>181</sup> 2 Peter 1: 8. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 182

<sup>182</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 183

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 182 f.

and ...unforsaken'.<sup>185</sup> In order to cultivate 'this deep repentance', he advised the believer to conduct a frequent and rigorous examination of the heart. Through grace, for true repentance was a grace,<sup>186</sup> the believer would be enabled to detect sin in his or her heart and so confess it. If this confession was made in faith the believer could certainly rely on the light and warmth of Christ's love to destroy the sin just as the light and warmth of the 'sun kill the worms which the plough turns to the open air in a dry summer's day'.<sup>187</sup>

### **A self-denial**

Alongside this deep repentance the earnest seeker after *Christian Perfection* must practice self-denial.<sup>188</sup> Jesus had in effect told the Rich Young Ruler<sup>189</sup> that he must go the way of the Cross if he really wanted *perfection*. If, therefore, the believer was to experience *Christian Perfection* he or she must also go that way. As Fletcher saw it, this for the believer would mean that he or she would have to go through severe tribulations and temptations. Nevertheless, whether God used 'the best men in his camp or the strongest men in satan's army' to cast the believer into 'a furnace of fiery temptations' he or she should not come out of it until God called him or her out, his purpose having been fulfilled.<sup>190</sup> Patient resignation was a vital ingredient in attaining a 'perfection of love'.

### **A Spirit-inspired faith**

However, lest the believer should become too resigned or perhaps over

<sup>185</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 183

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185

<sup>189</sup> Matthew 19: 16 ff.

<sup>190</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 186

concerned with works of repentance,<sup>191</sup> Fletcher, with the help of Wesley's sermon, *The Scripture way of Salvation*,<sup>192</sup> went on to stress the importance of faith in the whole process of the purification of the soul.<sup>193</sup> He maintained that just as the believer had discovered initial purification when he or she had responded in faith to the word of promise so too, complete and instant<sup>194</sup> cleansing would occur for those who responded in faith to the 'sanctifying promise of the Father'.<sup>195</sup> This faith was, of course, no mere human achievement but a work of the Spirit.<sup>196</sup> Here Fletcher noted that there was a difference of expression between Wesley and himself. According to Fletcher what he called 'faith apprehending a sanctifying baptism, or outpouring, of the Spirit'<sup>197</sup> Wesley called 'faith implying a twofold operation of the Spirit, productive of spiritual light and supernatural sight'.<sup>198</sup> This, as Fletcher saw it, was only a 'verbal difference' though he did feel his expression was more scriptural than Wesley's.

### ***A use of corporate prayer***

Linked with faith and the promise of the sanctifying Spirit, Fletcher also strongly recommended the use of corporate prayer as being 'eminently conducive' to the attainment of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>199</sup> The day of Pentecost was one such example of the power of corporate prayer as a means of grace. The hymn writer had written:

<sup>191</sup> While this is not clearly stated I think it is implied. Consider the quote from Wesley's sermon on *The Scripture Way of Salvation* which Fletcher claims he uses to 'confirm' and 'explain' the importance of faith, the relevant section is: "Likewise let a man have ever so much of this repentance....yet all this does not avail; he is not sanctified until he believes ...faith is the only condition which is immediately and proximately necessary to sanctification". *Wesley's Works*, [BE] Vol. 2, p. 167 f. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 189

<sup>192</sup> *Wesley's Works*, [BE] Vol. 2, pp. 153 - 169

<sup>193</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 187

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190 f.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192

“Where unity takes place,  
The joys of heaven we prove;  
This is the gospel grace,  
The unction from above,  
The Spirit on all believers shed,  
Descending swift from Christ their head.”<sup>200</sup>

Yet the person for whom shared prayer was not a possibility must not give up. Divine grace was not confined to numbers nor indeed to the few.<sup>201</sup> Jacob and Jesus had wrestled alone and come to the place of blessing. Neither should the believer be misled into thinking that the blessing of power and purity can only come in one particular way. It might well be preceded by ‘a storm of affliction, temptation or distress’.<sup>202</sup> It might come “softly” without the more spectacular manifestations of the Spirit. But, however God choose to answer the desire of the believer’s longing heart, he or she must not despise the blessing because of the method. The end result was still the same: sanctifying power dealing a death blow to the indwelling man of sin.<sup>203</sup> The solitary believer, therefore, must be encouraged to go on expecting God’s kingdom. Indeed, this very exercise has itself a purifying aspect about it. Fletcher stated:

“Besides, thy expectation of his coming is of a purifying nature, and gradually sanctifies thee.”<sup>204</sup>

There was plenty of encouragement to be found in the scriptures not only in the ‘heights of grace’<sup>205</sup> described but also in the promises given. The believer, therefore, should continue to glorify God by holding on in faith and praying:

“..Lord, I want a plenitude of thy Spirit, the full promise of the Father, and the rivers which flow from the inmost soul of the

<sup>200</sup> quoted in *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. VI, p. 193

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 194

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 194 f.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 195

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 197

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 203



believers who have gone on to the perfection of thy dispensation."<sup>206</sup>

### **Perfect Christians**

Finally, Fletcher gave some important directions to those who had found 'the blessed state of *Christian Perfection*'<sup>207</sup> beginning with a reminder that there is no state of grace from which the Christian is immune from falling. The devil had not lost the first card he had ever played against humankind; the absolute perseverance of the saints. So the believer who had discovered evangelical *perfection* must be alert to the possibility that Satan might again use it against him or her. But then, if Jesus Christ had to use all the means of grace at his disposal in fighting the world, the flesh, and the devil, when he was on earth, his disciples could not expect it to be any different for them. Fletcher contended that 'every one who is perfect shall be as his Master.'<sup>208</sup>

Again, a claim to Perfect Love does not mean perfect knowledge. Fletcher reminded his readers that they must always be open to instruction for any hint of a 'perfection of pride' was totally incompatible with any claim to Perfect Love.<sup>209</sup>

Furthermore, any claim to Perfect Love must not be confused with angelic *perfection*. Here Fletcher was concerned about 'ecstasies and extraordinary revelations' which in some cases apparently had been associated with the experience of Perfect Love. He warned that, while God might indulge the believer in such things, they must not be considered as a permanent feature of *Christian Perfection*. He argued that the wine of 'uninterrupted transports of praise, and ceaseless raptures of joy' was really

<sup>206</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 204

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210

unsuited to the 'old bottles' of our present humanity.<sup>210</sup> While it was true that God did sometimes indulge the believer with a 'few drops of that glorious cup', these should not be seen as the norm because they really belonged more properly to angelical *perfection*. Rather, the characteristics, which were more often called for in Perfect Love and altogether more suited to 'our mortal frames', were 'meekness', 'resignation', and a love which was 'willing to obey unto death'.<sup>211</sup> And here, of course, the perfect example was none other than Jesus Christ himself.<sup>212</sup> Fletcher then called perfect Christians to take up their cross and follow Him. The ultimate test on this road for the Christian, as it was for Christ, was to have perfect confidence in God when faced with death itself. Fletcher suggested that Christ might call some believers 'to know Him every way crucified'. Perfect Christians, therefore, should be 'ambitious' to ascend to the 'amazing heights of Christ's perfection' and win the victory over the 'last enemy - the king of terrors'.<sup>213</sup>

As love is marked by humility the perfect Christian should never pretend to any kind of infallibility. Contrary to what might be supposed, a willingness to acknowledge faults need not diminish a person's claim to Perfect Love; indeed it might rather enhance it. Fletcher stated:

"*Christian Perfection* shines as much in the child-like simplicity with which the perfect readily acknowledge their faults, as it does in the manly steadiness with which they 'resist unto blood, striving against sin'".<sup>214</sup>

But the humility of love not only enabled the believer to acknowledge his or her faults but also to admit before God his or her status as a 'miserable

<sup>210</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 210 f.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211 f.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214

sinner'.<sup>215</sup> While the Christian remained this side of heaven, indeed even in eternity, Fletcher rejected any notion that he or she could be anything other than a 'pardoned and sanctified sinner'.<sup>216</sup> He contended that mortality, the consequence of sin, served to remind the Christian of these roots. Such a reminder was really important when one considered that the 'final justification'<sup>217</sup> had still to take place and also that the paradisiacal law of perfection was still being broken.<sup>218</sup> Therefore, it was still 'meet and right' and the perfect Christian's 'bounden duty' to continue to consider himself or herself a sinner.

Fellowship which expressed itself in caring and loving others of whatever persuasion and condition was another mark of Perfect Love and to be encouraged in the perfect Christian. In Fletcher's mind the scriptural teaching of bearing one another's burdens, especially those of the weak, was quite clear.<sup>219</sup> Christ himself had provided plenty of examples. To act otherwise, then, would show that the believer, whatever his or her profession, had fallen from *Christian Perfection*. Furthermore to confine one's fellowship simply to like-minded people was nothing short of narrow 'prejudiced' bigotry.<sup>220</sup> This, again, was incompatible with any profession of *Christian Perfection*.

Being satisfied with God was another important aspect for the perfect Christian. Fletcher believed that as God was the 'supreme Good' the believer must exclude all other desires which did not please Him. He argued that the Christian should:

<sup>215</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 214 f.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215

<sup>217</sup> Fletcher saw the link between holiness and final salvation as inseparable. [ see: *Fletcher's Works*, p.208 n. ] It would appear therefore that here he is implying that a healthy awareness of our condition as sanctified sinners and the final justification still to come would help to keep us from falling into sin.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

“...make no account of any pleasure which does not bring you nearer to God, nor regard any pain which does; that you simply aim at pleasing him, whether by doing or by suffering; that the constant language of your heart, with regard to pleasure or pain, honour or dishonour, riches or poverty, is,

‘All’s alike to me, so I  
In my Lord may live and die’<sup>221</sup>

With regard to suffering the believer, like Paul, should be ambitious to be ‘made perfect in sufferings’. Indeed, Fletcher saw the Apostle as seeking to follow Christ even to a martyr’s crown. While such a path may not be the way for most, the perfect Christian could at least receive the reward of those who are ‘martyrs in intention’.<sup>222</sup> However, Fletcher was keen to point out that such ambition should never obscure the more mundane demands of daily living. It was possible to be so preoccupied with the future or indeed with the past that the believer might miss God’s will for the present.

In the matter of witnessing to the reality of the experience of *Christian Perfection* Fletcher warned against two dangers. Firstly, there was the danger of boasting. Love by its very nature was not given to pushing itself forward. There was then no place for self adulation. Yet if God had done something in the life of the believer it was surely incumbent upon him or her to give glory back to God. Herein lay the second danger: the failure to say what God had done and thus deny Him the glory due to His name. Such failure to share what God had done did not have to be prompted by any real concern to avoid boasting. Rather it could owe more to the motivation of cowardice or false moderation. Fletcher counselled a middle pathway. He stated:

“Let your tempers and lives always declare, that perfect love is attainable in this life; and when you have a proper call to declare it with your lips and pens do it without forwardness to the glory of

<sup>221</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. VI, p. 217

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218



God; do it with simplicity, for the edification of your neighbour; do it with godly jealousy....."<sup>223</sup>

In following this middle way Fletcher believed the perfect Christian could avoid the pitfalls of the two extremes. On the one hand he or she would not in anyway idolise the self by foolish or empty boasting. But on the other hand he or she would not remain ungratefully silent hiding 'the wonderful works of God'.<sup>224</sup> However, as Fletcher felt the former of the two errors was more abhorrent, he recommended the advice of Wesley, which in essence said that the perfect Christian should never appropriate the grace of God to himself or herself. Whether he or she had done something for God or received something from God it must always be handed over again to God for God alone was its true source. By so doing the perfect Christian would go on being filled with God.<sup>225</sup> Such advice, Fletcher believed, had been made actual in the life of Paul.<sup>226</sup> Indeed, Fletcher felt there could be no more fitting conclusion to his 'address to perfect Christians' than Paul's words to the Philippians. Fletcher gave them as follows :

"Brethren be followers of me...I count not myself to have apprehended (my angelical perfection) but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind (settling in none of my former experiences, resting in none of my good works) and reaching forth unto those things which are before I press toward the mark, for the (celestial) prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore as many as are perfect, be thus minded; and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you."<sup>227</sup>

### **An Essay on Truth**

Joseph Benson, close friend and one of Fletcher's first biographers, wrote:

"The *Essay on Truth* referred to by Mr. Fletcher in so many of

<sup>223</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 220

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 220

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 220 f.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 221

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 221 f.



his letters which he wrote at this time, was viewed by him as peculiarly important, and as containing doctrines particularly suited to the state of the church of Christ at that time.<sup>228</sup>

To elaborate on this Benson quoted from a letter which Fletcher had sent to Charles Wesley at the beginning of 1775. It stated:

"I am glad you did not altogether disapprove my Essay on Truth. The letter, I grant, profiteth little, until the Spirit animate it. I had, some weeks ago, one of those touches which realise, or rather spiritualise, the letter; and it convinced me more than ever that what I say in that tract, of the Spirit and of faith, is truth.— I am also persuaded that the Spirit and faith which belong to perfect Christianity, are at a very low ebb, even among believers. When the Son of Man cometh to set up his kingdom shall he find Christian faith upon the earth? Yes; but I fear, as little as he found of Jewish faith, when he came in the flesh. I believe you cannot rest with the easy Antinomian, or the busy Pharisee. You and I have nothing to do but to die to all that is of a sinful nature, and to pray for the power of an endless life."<sup>229</sup>

The essay was significant in general because it was considered to have something of a mark of inspiration about it but its particular importance in relation to *Christian Perfection* was its stress on fullness of the Spirit now available in the Christian dispensation.<sup>230</sup> Fletcher had divided the history of salvation into three main dispensations covering the heathen, the Jew and the Christian. While salvation in some measure belonged to all three dispensations, Fletcher argued that the Christian dispensation alone had the great privilege of the 'outpouring of the Holy Ghost'.<sup>231</sup> Such an 'outpouring', he maintained, offered the Christian believer a richness of experience which had previously been unavailable.<sup>232</sup> Yet just here there

<sup>228</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. I, p. 166 f.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167

<sup>230</sup> The idea of dispensations was a key concept for Fletcher and highly influential in this essay. In his battle with the Calvinists he called it his 'key and sword'. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 15-16. As well as being the controlling concept in the essay itself Fletcher defended and elaborated it in the two appendices. *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p p. 90 - 123

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>232</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 37

was a problem, 'the Spirit and faith' which ought to have been characteristic of this dispensation were, in Fletcher's opinion, noticeably lacking. He bemoaned the fact that 'many nominal Christians' not only fell below the standard of living offered in the Christian dispensation but also fell short of that offered to the 'heathens'.<sup>233</sup> His diagnosis of the situation laid the blame at the door of the 'easy Antinomian' and the 'busy Pharisee'. The former, he maintained, had disregarded the truth that 'God is holy' while the latter had neglected the fact that 'man is sinful'.<sup>234</sup> For Fletcher true Christianity was not to be found in the sin ignoring way of Antinomianism nor in the grace-ignoring way of Pelagianism but rather in the Spirit-honouring way of 'Scriptural Christianity'. Here was to be found the norm for Christianity and what *Christian Perfection* was really all about.

Fletcher as in the *Last Check* divided the essay into two parts, the first concerned an appeal to reason, the second an appeal to the heart.<sup>235</sup>

### **The Appeal to Reason.**

#### **What is 'saving faith'?**

Fletcher was concerned that believing should be seen as something entirely dependent on the divine and without any human input. He began with a definition of 'saving faith' which stated:

"justifying or saving faith is believing the saving truth 'with the heart unto' internal, and, as we have opportunity, unto external 'righteousness' according to our light and dispensation."<sup>236</sup>

Rejecting as 'erroneous'<sup>237</sup> any suggestion that 'saving faith' was some kind of irresistible power imposed on humankind irrespective of its wishes, he

<sup>233</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 92

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11 f.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

argued that 'saving faith' should be seen as a 'gift of God's grace' to enable and not to overwhelm a person so that he or she could 'hear', 'read', 'inquire', 'consider', 'assent', 'consent', 'resolve', and 're-resolve' to believe the truth, according to his or her dispensation.<sup>238</sup> It was possible to look at some people and wonder how they could ever believe if God did not bring such an overwhelming force into their lives. But it was here that the doctrine of the 'gospel dispensations' could be helpful.<sup>239</sup> Fletcher believed it to be possible that such people, despite appearances, might have a true belief in God. For although their faith could never be described in terms of the 'meridian light of the Christian dispensation'<sup>240</sup> it might, nevertheless, be the beginning of the faith journey where such people<sup>241</sup> would go from 'faith to faith' until such a full assurance was reached.<sup>242</sup>

Faith must never be confused with 'its fruits and rewards', as in some sort of measurable sign which would prove that faith was present.<sup>243</sup> The absence of 'signs' must not be interpreted by the believer to mean that he or she was without faith or indeed that his or her faith was vain.<sup>244</sup> Fletcher argued that 'fruits' and 'rewards' were entirely at God's disposal and that the believer could no more create these than he or she could create a world. Such a believer should continue to work out his or her own salvation and God could be counted on to do his part.<sup>245</sup> This was not to say that

<sup>238</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 14

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> The use of the word 'believer' should not be seen in the specifically Christian sense but rather in the sense of believing truth according to his or her dispensational light.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94

<sup>243</sup> He gave scriptural illustration of signs when he asked: "Had Abraham no faith in God's promise till Isaac was born? Was Sarah a damnable unbeliever till she felt the long expected fruit of her womb stir there? Had the woman of Canaan no faith till our Lord granted her request and cried out, 'O woman great is thy faith, let it be done unto thee as thou wilt'?... Had the apostles no faith in 'the promise of the Father' till their heads were actually crowned with celestial fire?" *Ibid.*, p. 16 f.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18

assistance from heaven was not required. All ability or opportunity to believe came from heaven. As John had indicated, everyone born into the world would benefit from 'the light of Christ's saving grace';<sup>246</sup> a person need only respond positively to begin to discover the richness which could be available. Nevertheless, this was not the same as saying that God by some outstanding display of power forced men and women to believe or in some way believed for them. The grace of God was such that it set humankind free to respond but the response could be negative or positive. That there were sudden conversions which suggested great displays of God's irresistible power, Fletcher did not deny. But to him sudden conversions were always preceded by a 'gradual transition',<sup>247</sup> which had been going on before the moment of conversion. It was as a person responded to God's grace that he or she would be led step by step into the fullest of all dispensations, that of the 'out-pouring of the Holy Ghost'.<sup>248</sup>

### **What is 'saving truth'?**<sup>249</sup>

Fletcher believed that the object of 'saving faith' must be 'saving truth'<sup>250</sup> for as he had said 'saving faith is believing saving truth'. He defined truth as

<sup>246</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 19 (see John 1: 9.)

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>249</sup> Not all truth was 'saving truth': there were various kinds of truth. For example, as well as religious truth there was natural truth. Natural truth did improve the understanding but out of its proper place could also be a hindrance to the work of God. So natural truths could usurp the place of spiritual realities by being seen as the substance instead of, what they really were, the shadow. Fletcher, by way of illustration, cited the heathen's concern with the material sun rather than the immaterial Creator God to which it pointed. Then there was the Protestant concern with the outward form of baptism missing the reality to which it pointed, the baptism of the Spirit. So while every kind of truth had the potential for improvement in humankind's understanding, it was nevertheless only religious truth which had the power to improve the will and ultimately change the person where it really mattered.

<sup>250</sup> As he worked on the essay he had become more convinced of the importance of this fact. In another letter to Joseph Benson he stated:

"...an over-eager attention to the doctrine of the Spirit has made me, in some degree, overlook the medium by which the Spirit works - I mean the word of truth ... by which the heavenly fire warms us. I rather expected lightening than a steady fire by means of fuel" John Fletcher, Madeley, 20 March 1774, to Joseph Benson quoted in Tyerman, p. 310



follows:

"Truth is spiritual substance and a lie spiritual shadow. Truth is spiritual light and a lie spiritual darkness. Truth is the root of all virtue and a lie is the root of all vice. Truth is the celestial tincture that makes spirits good, and a lie the infernal tincture that makes them evil. A lie is as nearly related to the devil as infection to one that has the plague, or opacity to the earth; and truth is as nearly related to God as fragrancy to burning incense, and light to the unclouded sun."<sup>251</sup>

Truth so intimately linked with the 'God of truth' was, he maintained, ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, in turn was revealed in the scriptures, the Word of God.<sup>252</sup> Therefore, when a person responded to the word of God he or she was actually responding to Jesus Christ Himself who was the Truth.<sup>253</sup> Fletcher encouraged the reader to make a positive response to truth stating:

"...try.. believing now what appears to thee to be the saving truth of thy dispensation: believe it with all thy present might, be it little or be it much; and if in a little time thou dost not find thyself more settled and free, more able to fight against sin and to take up thy cross, let me bear the blame for ever."<sup>254</sup>

Again, as in the matter of faith, God would not force the truth upon humanity. Had the success of God's word depended solely on Him then 'the truth would always operate in a saving manner'<sup>255</sup> but this was not the case. However powerful 'the seed' of the word the ground into which it fell was crucial. People must respond to the truth in faith before it could become 'saving truth', ultimately bringing 'forth fruit to perfection'.<sup>256</sup> So the gospel was indeed the 'power of God to salvation' but only to those who believed in the truth. Human choice was not overridden.

Of course, as already indicated, Fletcher did not restrict 'saving truth' to the

<sup>251</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 20

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22 f.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 26

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28 f.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29



Christian dispensation. While it was true the 'richer truths' belonged to the Christian dispensation, the power of the Spirit enabling an 'adult Christian' to experience an intimacy with Christ previously unknown, this did not mean that the Spirit was inactive before this time. Fletcher argued that every person born into the world benefited because of 'the light that enlightens every man'. When a person, assisted by the Spirit's power, willingly responded to the word of truth that person would receive power to become a son of God according to his or her dispensation.<sup>257</sup> He stated:

"If free will, prevented by free grace, ardently receives the truths of the Christian gospel, Christian faith is conceived. If the heart fervently embraces the truths of the Jewish or gentile gospel, (those which are peculiar to the Christian gospel remaining as yet veiled,) the faith of a Jew or of a heathen is begotten."<sup>258</sup>

Therefore, although the truth was not fully revealed until the Christian dispensation, the heathen and Jewish era was not without 'saving truth'. Fletcher believed scriptural support for this position could be seen in such verses as:

"For in every nation, he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him."<sup>259</sup>

"God hath made of one blood all nations of men...that they should seek the Lord."<sup>260</sup>

Jesus' reference to 'other sheep'<sup>261</sup> was also included in this category. To exclude such people from the grace of God was regarded by Fletcher as nothing less than 'antichristian zeal for the Christian gospel' which far from leading them into the fold would only drive them into hell.<sup>262</sup> As he saw it, the 'faithful soul' who followed the truth available in his or her dispensation

<sup>257</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 33

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>259</sup> Acts 10 : 35. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 36. (see also in *Notes*, Wesley agrees.)

<sup>260</sup> Acts 17 : 26. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 36. (see also in *Notes*. Wesley agrees.)

<sup>261</sup> John 10: 16. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 36

<sup>262</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 35 f.

could experience 'saving in its degree'<sup>263</sup> for the interplay between truth, faith and the Spirit was active in every age.

**What is 'internal' and 'external' 'righteousness'?**

Fletcher, in his definition of faith, had made a connection between faith and works. Truth, as seen in the gospel, may be admired and assented to without it being really operative in the life. Bare speculation upon the 'doctrines of the gospel' would not produce 'saving health'.<sup>264</sup> Indeed, as with 'the devils', the force of truth may be undeniable but this was not sufficient to make it 'saving truth'. Further, however much men and women may profess to follow the truth, if sin still prevailed in their lives the truth was really 'inefficacious' to their salvation.<sup>265</sup> Fletcher insisted that 'saving truth' would produce living faith which in turn must always result in good works.<sup>266</sup> He believed that it was as ludicrous to think that King David still had 'living faith' in his heart when he committed adultery with Bathsheba as it was to suppose there was still health 'in a body infected by plague' or 'life in a corpse'.<sup>267</sup> Fletcher could not accept that a person's faith can be good when his or her actions were bad. This was contrary to the teaching of Christ Himself who had taught that a tree was to be 'known by its fruit'.<sup>268</sup> The doctrine of the Church of England was expressed in the terms:

"Albeit that good works, which are the fruits of faith and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins and endure the severity of God's judgment, yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ and do spring necessarily out of a true and lively faith, in so much that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit."<sup>269</sup>

<sup>263</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 36

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49

<sup>268</sup> Matthew 12: 33., Luke 6: 44

<sup>269</sup> The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, The Twelfth Article, Noll, p. 217

However, if salvation really depended on a person's response to 'saving truth' why, in order to put it beyond doubt, had God not clearly marked in each dispensation the necessary 'saving truth'? Fletcher's answer was that God in his wisdom had qualified:

"..the blaze of the day of truth by the mild obscurity of a night of probation; not only that the flaming truth may be more delightful in its return, but also that there may be room left for a gentle trial of our faith, and for the reasonable rewardableness of our works of faith."<sup>270</sup>

Another difficulty in relating 'saving faith' to good works was the problem of 'fallen saints'. Fletcher believed that his opponents in stressing 'faith alone' were prepared to allow that:

"..true Christians may go any length in sin; may plunge into adultery, murder, or incest, and even proceed to the open worship of devils, like Solomon, without losing their title to throne of glory, and their justifying, sanctifying faith!"<sup>271</sup>

He totally rejected such a notion. But did this mean the 'fallen saint' was a total reprobate? Fletcher did not accept this inference. He argued that while true faith in the fullest sense was indeed lost and the light extinguished it continued to smoke, thus making it easier to relight.<sup>272</sup>

### **The Appeal to Conscience**

Having appealed to 'reason', Fletcher now moves on to address the 'conscience'. He addressed five groups<sup>273</sup> identified as:

Baptised Heathen

Christianised Jews

Moralists

<sup>270</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 62

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66

Mourning Penitents

Happy Believers.

**The “baptised Heathens”**

‘Baptised Heathens’ despite the meaning and obligations of their baptism had paid scant attention to the truth. He called on them to consider three types of truth which he suggested would appeal to their senses, reason and conscience. The three were:

Natural truths

Moral truths

Evangelical truths.

***Natural truths*<sup>274</sup>**

Life solely made up of pleasure, profit and honour was an illusion which would be shattered by death and judgment. In Fletcher’s opinion if these people, who made up the bulk of the nation, were to pause long enough to consider this natural truth their delusion would be realised and they would be turned towards religion.<sup>275</sup>

***Moral truths*<sup>276</sup>**

Was the idea of a ‘day of judgment’ true? Fletcher believed it was, contending for the existence of a moral law, which he asserted was universally acknowledged in practice by every person’s conscience. He reasoned that if the conscience of the individual condemned him or her how much more the God of truth who was its creator. Anyone of ‘good sense’, who reflected on the actuality of the world, must surely conclude the reality of the God of Truth. This God would call all to account if not in this world certainly in the next. Again, such sober reflection should lead a person towards religion.

<sup>274</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. IV, p. 67

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68 point 3

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67 f.



### ***Evangelical truths***<sup>277</sup>

Fletcher believed these truths were well substantiated and it would have been very foolish indeed to reject them.<sup>278</sup>

The case of 'baptised heathens' was dangerous but it was far from hopeless. He called on them to look again at Calvary and see God's love for them. They should not let any apostate, hypocritical or professing Christian keep them from the truth of the gospel. Identifying himself with them as 'dear fellow-sinners' he called them to return to the Lord.

### ***The "Christianised Jews"***<sup>279</sup>

Here Fletcher attacked the doctrine of double predestination identifying those who preached such a doctrine as being at one with the Jewish exclusiveness which damned the Gentiles, hence the label, Christianised Jews. Fletcher called for a better knowledge of the God of love and truth and rejected the 'doctrines of forcible grace to hundreds and of forcible wrath to thousands' in favour of free grace to all. But did such an emphasis not merely encourage the delusion of the moralists? Fletcher said 'No'.

### ***The "moralists"***<sup>280</sup>

According to Fletcher this group had false notions of their own goodness

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<sup>277</sup> **Fletcher's Works**, Vol. IV, p. 68 ff.

<sup>278</sup> Fletcher believed that these truths were backed up by:

well - attested facts,  
righteous witnesses,  
miracles,  
prophecies.

He further saw them as being in agreement with:

the glory of the Creator,  
interests of mankind,  
the laws of nature,  
the desire for immortality,  
the *summum bonum* present and future.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., pp. 70 - 76

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., pp. 76 - 80

because they had failed to measure themselves against God's holiness. They had failed to see sin for what it was and consequently lacked any sense of need of Christ. But could it not be argued that such people were saved under the same dispensation as that of the righteous heathen? Fletcher stated a number of reasons why such a conclusion should not be drawn.

- a. Any sincere lover of truth would not reject the truth as it is revealed in the gospel. It would be unreasonable to make any such claim.
- b. They had really refused to reckon with the fall of humankind. Yet even pagans had been known to recognise the need of a mediator and a sacrifice. The moralists in their self righteousness had sunk below the heathens.
- c. Whatever the dispensation, no one was ever saved without repentance, yet Fletcher sees the moralists as devoid of repentance. He argues that standing in the way of Christianity is 'pharisaism and impenitency' not respect of reason and truth.
- d. Heathens saved without the explicit knowledge of Christ did not despise the truth but really desired it. By calling it 'enthusiasm' the moralists rejected it. This did not mean that Fletcher rejected morality for he believed morality to be the second branch of piety. The crucial factor was what motivated morality. If it was humility, sincerity, and truth, all was well. But it might be pride, impenitency or hypocrisy and if so it had a 'worm at the root'.<sup>281</sup> Temptation or death would reveal its inadequacy to offer the person so deceived any safety or comfort.

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<sup>281</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 79

### **The “mourning penitent”<sup>282</sup>**

The fourth group addressed was the ‘mourning penitent’.<sup>283</sup> Fletcher’s concern here was for those who, while truly repentant wait, to be ‘forcibly’ convinced of their election. He rejected such thinking encouraging such to believe in their conditional election until the truths of the gospel were applied. He argued that although God did need to work, this should not be seen as excluding human effort.

### **The “happy believers”<sup>284</sup>**

The final group to be addressed were those whom he called ‘happy believers’. He defined such as those:

“..who see that God is love, - boundless, free, redeeming, pardoning, comforting, sanctifying love in Jesus Christ”.<sup>285</sup>

He exhorted them to continue in this ‘work of faith’ sailing on with care through the straits of pharisaism and antinomianism, steady in their adherence to the whole truth as it was seen in Jesus. The fact that they now believed did not mean that they were out of danger. Others had believed as they had and were now in error. They must not be swayed by popular opinion nor seduced by persuasive oratory but continue to hold fast to the truth, even if the whole world stood against them. Jesus himself had stood alone so Fletcher concluded in prayer:

“O Jesus stand by our weakness, and we will stand by thy truth. Thou sayest ‘Will ye also go away?’ And to whom should we go gracious Lord: hast thou not the words of truth, the words of everlasting life? Art thou not the light of the world, and the light of men? Our light and life? Could all the ‘ignes fatui’ in the professing world, could all the stars in thy church, supply the want of thy light to our souls? No, Lord; be then our sun

<sup>282</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. IV, pp. 80 - 86

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80 f f.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86 - 89

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86

and shield for ever. Visit the earth again, thou uncreated sun of righteousness and truth: hasten thy second advent! Thy kingdom come! Shine without a cloud! Scatter the last remains error's night! Kindle our minds into pure truth! Our hearts into perfect love! Our tongues into ardent praise! Our lives into flaming obedience!"<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 89



According to Fletcher the reason for this addition was the need to give certain objections a 'more direct and fuller answer'.

Some people obviously had difficulty with the notion that there could be any salvation outside of Christianity, a notion suggested by his doctrine of gospel dispensations and fundamental to the essay. Fletcher pointed again to what he felt was the scriptural support for varying degrees of faith.<sup>288</sup>

Though in allowing varying degrees of faith, he firmly rejected any idea that faith had a 'diversity of species'. 'Saving faith' under all dispensations was quite clearly distinguished by certain essentials. These were:

" 1. It is begotten by the revelation of some saving truth presented by free grace, impressed by the Spirit, and received by the believer's free agency. 2. It has the same original cause in all, that is, the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. 3. It actually saves all, though in various degrees. 4. It sets all upon 'working righteousness; some bearing fruit thirty, some sixty, and some an hundred fold.' And, 5. Through Christ it will bring all who do not make shipwreck of it, to one or another of the 'many mansions' which our Lord is gone to prepare in heaven for his believing, obedient people; that is, for those who get clear of practical pharisaism and antinomianism."<sup>289</sup>

So, while there was essentially no difference between the faith of a Christian or the faith of a righteous heathen if it was 'saving faith', there was indeed a difference in degree.

If it is accepted that saving faith exists in other dispensations, this could, of course, encourage some to settle for less than the best. Fletcher responded with a number of observations. He suggested that it would be both cruel and unscriptural to say that only those who had experienced 'the kingdom of God in the Holy Ghost' had true faith. The Old Testament picture of the

<sup>287</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, pp. 90 - 103

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90 - 93

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94

journeying of the Children of Israel encouraged the concept of moving on 'from faith to faith'. To exclude the earnest seeker from the comfort which the gospel gave to those who did seek was not right. Indeed, Fletcher contended that had such faith been allowed, many sincere ministers who had opposed the revival might have been more kindly disposed to it.<sup>290</sup> Instead the dogmatism which insisted that only the 'faith of assurance' was genuine had put them off. Fletcher denied that there was any proof for the contention that a person could only know the comfort of the Spirit of God when he or she knew the full assurance. For example, in Paul and Peter evidence could be found that those who feared God would experience salvation.<sup>291</sup> Therefore the doctrine of dispensations, 'if properly guarded', far from lulling people into a spiritual sleep, might actually encourage the 'perfecting of holiness'.<sup>292</sup> But how might the Christian dispensation be guarded? According to Fletcher by affirming:

- "1. That all Christian believers have now 'the witness in themselves'.
2. That those who have it not, either never had the Christian faith...; or that..they are 'fallen from grace'..; and now live 'under the law'..
3. That if they do not press after the faith of assurance they are in the utmost danger of losing their talent of grace..."<sup>293</sup>

So the failure to heed the call to go on to perfection was nothing short of neglect of a great salvation. Fletcher concluded that the doctrine of the dispensations would not endanger sincere penitents in discovering such a salvation. Indeed, it might provide the 'scriptural clue' enabling them to avoid 'pharisaic despair' and 'antinomian presumption' and find the fullness of salvation now available in the Christian dispensation.

Another objection to the essay was that it had confused faith and works. Yet

<sup>290</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 99

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100 e.g Acts 13: 26; Acts 2: 7, 10: 7

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101 f.

Fletcher felt that he had 'carefully distinguished' between the two by identifying 'faith as the beating of the heart and works as the pulses caused thereby'.<sup>294</sup> He even claimed that Augustine supported him in this distinction. Some, apparently, had objected to the essay on the grounds that Fletcher's views on truth were odd. He asserted that scripture and reason were on his side and he had no need to fear 'singularity'.<sup>295</sup> Nonetheless, he sought to counter any such objection by calling 'two of the most judicious divines of the last century, Mr. Flavel<sup>296</sup> and Mr. Goodwin'<sup>297</sup> to his defence.<sup>298</sup> Both men, Fletcher considered, confirmed his stress on the importance of truth.

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<sup>294</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 95

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95 f f.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 219, 266

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95

## Appendix II

Fletcher felt the need to add this further addition to 'explain, strengthen, and guard the doctrine contained in the essay'.<sup>299</sup>

He returned first to his contention that all men through the grace of God had 'some' power to believe 'some' saving truth. He argued that when the scriptures spoke of people who could not believe, it was to be understood:

"either of persons whose day of grace was over, and who of course were justly 'given up to a reprobate mind', as the men mentioned Romans 1: 21, 28; or of persons, who by not using their one talent of power to believe the obvious truths belonging to a lower dispensation, absolutely incapacitated themselves to believe the deep truths belonging to Christianity."<sup>300</sup>

Yet if all had the capacity to believe in Christ, why was it contrary to experience?<sup>301</sup> Was it not true that the best Christians remembered a time when they could no more believe than make a world? But this was the wrong inference to draw from the earlier statement in which he had said:

"..so long as the day of salvation continues, all sinners, who have not yet finally hardened themselves, may day and night, (through the help and power of the general light of Christ's grace mentioned, John 1: 9, Titus 2: 11) receive some truth belonging to the everlasting gospel..<sup>302</sup>

Here, Fletcher maintained he had not intended to imply that anyone at anytime could choose to believe and so experience the 'full assurance of faith'.<sup>303</sup> The penitent could not believe at will.<sup>304</sup> Such faith required the revelation of God's 'powerful arm'. Yet this did not mean that everything else, which was short of 'full assurance', could not be called faith and must be rejected. Explicit faith in Christ was not the only faith which was valid. In

<sup>299</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 103

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111

other dispensations it was possible to have an an implicit faith in Christ which was also valid. Fletcher rejected as unscriptural any attempt to 'rank among absolute unbelievers the penitent who thus humbly and obediently [waited] for the full assurance of faith'.<sup>305</sup> This point had been reached through the operation of the Spirit freeing their wills and impressing upon their hearts the truths necessary for saving faith in their dispensation.<sup>306</sup> They must not therefore be consigned to the place of the damned. Rather, as in the parable of the talents,<sup>307</sup> they should be encouraged to improve on what truths they already held pressing on to the 'full assurance of faith' which God would certainly give to them.

Another objection was that Fletcher's understanding of faith depended on his doctrine of dispensations which, it was argued, was based on far-out fanciful notions. Of course, Fletcher believed it had a sound basis in scripture, reason, and conscience.<sup>308</sup> Nevertheless, in an effort to refute the charge of novelty, he identified and quoted from a Calvinist and an anti-Calvinist who, he claimed, also believed the doctrine. The first witness was a Rev. Green, who, according to Fletcher was at one time an assistant to George Whitefield. Quoting from a book called *Grace and Truth Vindicated* Fletcher recorded Green as stating:

" ..the outward privileges of religion from Adam to Moses were least; from Moses to Christ greater; and from Christ to the restitution of all things greatest. Again: to be a spiritual or enlightened Jew, and with Peter and the other disciples before the day of pentecost, to believe and acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, though not spiritually come, is a greater. But to be a spiritual Christian, to have Christ, the exalted God-man, revealed in us from heaven, and to be sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise unto the day of the redemption of this vile body, is the last and most perfect dispensation of grace."<sup>309</sup>

<sup>305</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 110

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111

<sup>307</sup> Matthew 25: 15 ff., Luke 19: 12 ff.

<sup>308</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 112

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113



The second witness was Wesley. Quoting from his sermons, *Salvation by Faith* and *Christian Perfection* Fletcher showed Wesley's acceptance of the doctrine of dispensations.<sup>310</sup> After such excellent quotations Fletcher reasoned it would be an honour if he were credited with being the first to expound the doctrine of dispensations.

The final objection was that the doctrine of dispensations did not edify the Church but merely served to puzzle the ordinary Christian and should be avoided.<sup>311</sup> Fletcher, in response, claimed that the doctrine of dispensations was implicit in the creeds and liturgies of the Church. An example of this could be seen in the Apostles' Creed where it referred to faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>312</sup> He further maintained that this could be substantiated from the New Testament. The words of Jesus: 'Ye believe in God, believe also in me'<sup>313</sup> distinguished between faith in the Father and faith in the Son. Faith in the Holy Ghost occurred when the heart was set on the 'promise of the Father', the Spirit being the object of promise.<sup>314</sup>

The experiences of the primitive Christians also supported the idea of degrees of faith. Fletcher pointed to Luke's description of those who were present at the feast of Pentecost as<sup>315</sup> 'devout men from every nation'.<sup>316</sup> Here was faith in the Father but not yet in the Son for many of these people still rejected Christ. The realisation of this rejection came as Peter preached for, according to Luke, they were 'pricked to the heart'.<sup>317</sup> Fletcher contended that this was so because they now believed Christ was 'the true Messiah'. Here was an explicit faith in the Son.<sup>318</sup> Peter directed that this faith should

<sup>310</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 114 f.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115 f.

<sup>313</sup> John 14: 1.

<sup>314</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 119

<sup>315</sup> Acts 2: 5.

<sup>316</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 119

<sup>317</sup> Acts 2: 37.

<sup>318</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 119

be made public in baptism encouraging them to believe the 'promise relating to pardon and to the Comforter'.<sup>319</sup> Fletcher reasoned that on believing this promise and no doubt upon their fervently praying that it might be fulfilled in them , 'they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.'<sup>320</sup> Thus they had reached the dispensation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>321</sup>

Finally, Fletcher argued that the doctrine of dispensations was indirectly taught by the Church in its catechism and also in its office of Confirmation.<sup>322</sup>

In the catechism the child was taught:

" first to believe in God the Father, who made me,' &c.;  
secondly, 'in God the Son, who redeemed me,' &c.; and  
thirdly, 'in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me.'<sup>323</sup>

Here were the three great dispensations of the everlasting gospel: 'that of the heathens, that of the Jews, that of spiritual Christians'.<sup>324</sup> With regard to Confirmation, Fletcher believed it had been 'originally intended to lead young believers to the fullness of the Christian dispensation'.<sup>325</sup> The biblical basis for this being in Acts, when Peter and John had laid hands on the Samaritan believers to be baptised in the Holy Spirit.<sup>326</sup> However, as Fletcher observed, while the fullness of faith may have been the original intention of Confirmation, many of his contemporaries seemed to be satisfied with less. He longed for 'apostolic pastors' who would pray in the

<sup>319</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 120. [see Acts 2: 38.]

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120

<sup>321</sup> With regard to this dispensation Fletcher noted that its coming was attended by 'an uncommon degree of sanctifying grace', in particular he referred to the gift of tongues. He saw this gift as a sign to 'bigoted Jews or to stupid heathens' but by no means an essential part of the baptism of the Spirit. Indeed he considered it 'remarkable' that, although three thousand people were converted on the day of Pentecost, no mention was made of a single one either speaking in tongues or performing a miracle. The greatest miracle was that they 'believed' and were of 'one heart and one soul'. So Fletcher saw such outward phenomena as a 'temporary appendage' the essential aspect being the transformation of the believer into the likeness of Christ. see *Ibid.*, p. 120 f.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.* see: Acts 8 : 12 ff.

Spirit's power the words from the order of Confirmation:

"Strengthen thy servants, O Lord, with the Holy Ghost, the Comforter; and daily increase in them thy manifold gifts of grace; the spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and ghostly strength; the spirit of knowledge and true godliness; and fill them with the spirit of thy holy fear, now and forever."<sup>327</sup>

He bemoaned the lack of response to this prayer. 'Saving faith' was destroyed by a 'pharisaic deistical world'<sup>328</sup> and 'fullness of faith' was denied by an antinomian sufficiency. Fletcher called on the Lord to exert his power in an outpouring of the Spirit on all 'flesh'.<sup>329</sup>

### **Discourse on New Birth**<sup>330</sup>

In his sermon the Discourse on New Birth, as in the previous essay, it appears that Fletcher had in his sight what he considered to be the poor health of the contemporary Christian world. He bemoaned its corruption as well as its general indifference towards the 'deep truths of Christianity'. Those who had been charged with the responsibility of showing the way of salvation were fearful about speaking out lest they be considered as being pessimistic or indeed lacking in love. Yet there was a great need to declare the 'essential truths' of Christianity. Some still had good desires for 'the religion of our fathers' and the affirmation of the basic truths would satisfy their hunger. Others required to be taught for they had opposed the gospel only in ignorance believing that they did God a service. Fletcher, therefore,

<sup>327</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 122

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123

<sup>329</sup> This should not be interpreted to mean that Fletcher saw other dispensations as without the Spirit's power. He stated in an earlier foot note that: "When I say that 'pious Jews, and our Lord's disciples before the day of pentecost, were strangers to the great outpouring of the Spirit' I do not mean that they were strangers to his directing, sanctifying, and enlivening influences according to their dispensation." He gave examples from scripture why he thought this was so. He argued that as the promise of the Father had not yet been given they were as yet not "fully baptised" This, to Fletcher, was the good old gospel which Wesley had more clearly set out in his sermon *Scriptural Christianity* *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 116 - 117 footnote.

<sup>330</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, pp. 302 - 336

sought to explain one of the 'essential truths' of Christianity: 'the doctrine of regeneration or new birth in Jesus Christ'.<sup>331</sup> His text was taken from the Gospel of John, it was:

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."<sup>332</sup>

He considered it under four headings:

"Firstly, Upon what occasion our Lord Jesus Christ declared, that 'except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'?

Secondly, What we are to understand by these expressions, 'to be born again', 'to be regenerated'?

Thirdly, What are the reasons upon which the absolute necessity of our regeneration is founded; and how easy, and yet dangerous it is, to take the reformation of our manners for the regeneration of our souls ?

**Lastly**, How we may come to true renovation without which no man can see the kingdom of God?"<sup>333</sup>

Fletcher appears to be asking: Where? What? Why? How?

## **Where?**

Fletcher considered the context of the statement.<sup>334</sup> 'To whom, and how,' did Jesus preach 'regeneration'? It was, of course, to Nicodemus noted for his religious devotion as well as his intellect and standing in the community.<sup>335</sup> Fletcher maintained that Jesus disabused Nicodemus with regard to his

<sup>331</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 304

<sup>332</sup> John 3 : 3. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, p. 303

<sup>333</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 305

<sup>334</sup> John 3: 1 ff.

<sup>335</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 305



pious Jewish expectations of the kingdom of God. It was impossible to see the kingdom of God without spiritual regeneration. Nicodemus, Fletcher stated:

“notwithstanding all his virtue, his religion, his zeal, his sincerity, and his love for instruction, was not yet regenerated.”<sup>336</sup>

He, therefore, belonged to the number of ‘righteous’ people then and since who felt no need of ‘deep repentance or spiritual renovation’.<sup>337</sup> This despite the fact that the scriptures had all along clearly indicated the need for such spiritual change.

‘How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Fletcher saw the astonishment of Nicodemus at the suggestion of rebirth as arising from a literal understanding of the words of Jesus. But Fletcher understood Jesus was speaking about spiritual birth. The kingdom of God was spiritual. Fletcher stated:

“If the pure waters of grace, of which those of baptism are emblematic, do not render white as snow those sins which are red as scarlet; and if the powerful operation of the Spirit of God do not renew all the faculties of his soul, causing him to be born again of incorruptible seed, by which he may recover the image of his Creator, become thus a partaker of the divine nature, he shall have no part in the inheritance of the saints in light; the entrance of that kingdom shall be shut against him for ever.”<sup>338</sup>

However, despite being told twice about the necessity of regeneration for salvation, Nicodemus was still surprised. Jesus therefore repeated the words ‘Ye must be born again’ and drew an analogy with the wind to suggest that the new birth was not as ‘absurd and impossible’ as it might appear. Just as it was possible to feel the effects of the wind without being

<sup>336</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 307

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307



able to describe it, so also a person could experience the change of new birth and not be able to describe how the Spirit had effected the change.<sup>339</sup> Yet Nicodemus still was unsure, 'How can these things be?' Jesus expressed surprise that 'the teacher' in Israel should not know. Fletcher concluded that Jesus had shown Nicodemus that religion was not mere speculation on doctrines but an 'experimental knowledge'.<sup>340</sup>

### **What?**

While Jesus had not actually explained the 'what' of new birth, Fletcher still believed it was possible to explain what had actually taken place. In a general sense, he described it as 'the great change by which a man passes from a state of nature to a state of grace'.<sup>341</sup> His natural birth had made him like 'fallen Adam' but the spiritual birth would make him like Christ, 'the second Adam'.<sup>342</sup> It was like a 'new creation'.<sup>343</sup>

More particularly, taking his cue from Jesus' analogy, Fletcher attempted to explain the whole process of spiritual birth by comparing it closely with the natural process of birth. He argued that embryonic life was largely insensible of the world into which it was to come. This despite the fact that it was already in the world. Close to the moment of birth it may show signs which might distinguish it from what would otherwise be an indistinguishable 'mass of matter'. But, even then, the world around it was still unknown. This was also true for 'unregenerate' humanity. God was the source of all life yet humanity in general was really insensible of that divine presence.<sup>344</sup> As in the natural realm there could be signs of life which pre-

<sup>339</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 308 f.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310. As the context suggests the word 'experiential' picks up the intended meaning of the word 'experimental'.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311

<sup>342</sup> 1 Corinthians 15: 22.

<sup>343</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, p. 312

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312 f.

empty birth, there could be signs of spiritual life such as good desires with a positive effort to turn to God but such signs should not be mistaken for regeneration.<sup>345</sup> Birth in the natural sphere was a painful experience; Fletcher identifies 'sighs, tears and even piercing cries', as being part of the process. In the spiritual sphere too, the painful process in the 'sorrows of repentance' could not be avoided. Of course, the existence of the infant after birth was unmistakably different from that existence in the womb. The child, through its senses, was now alert to the world. Regeneration had a similar effect in that the spiritual senses have come alive making the new born Christian alive to God and 'capable of discerning spiritual objects'.<sup>346</sup>

### Why?

Fletcher sought to prove the absolute necessity of being 'born again'.<sup>347</sup> He argued that all humankind were born spiritually dead, 'alienated from the life of God' and without the regenerating power of God this situation would not be changed. Yet change it must if ever any unholy child of Adam was to see the 'face of God'.<sup>348</sup> Fletcher insisted that the scriptures showed that humankind must be 'cleansed from [their] natural corruption and become partakers of the nature of Christ, and of the image of God', if ever they hoped to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>349</sup> Indeed, if it were possible for a person to be in heaven without new birth, the absence of life in the spiritual senses would make it hell.<sup>350</sup> But it was not possible, for the only way to heaven from earth was through new birth. Fletcher contends it was reasonable to conclude that in death as in life a person followed his or her master.<sup>351</sup>

<sup>345</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 313

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316 f.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319 f.

Regeneration or new birth then was the 'first degree of salvation'.<sup>352</sup>

Under this third heading, he warned again of the dangers of confusing a 'reformation in manners' with regeneration.<sup>353</sup> It was possible, Fletcher maintained, to fulfil the 'exterior duties of religion'<sup>354</sup> but not be a Christian. The marks of a new and spiritual birth were more than mere conformity to 'moral duties' and outward 'piety'. An experiential knowledge of peace with God and a relationship with His Son confirmed within by the Spirit of adoption was what was required.<sup>355</sup> This demanded a complete revolution in the soul which was not to be found by depending on 'good works', 'sincerity', 'religious duties' or 'self-righteousness'.<sup>356</sup> Nothing short of regeneration would accomplish this, for what was required was 'a new heart, a right spirit, the kingdom of God within'.<sup>357</sup> Without this a person remained reformed in his or her sins.

## How?

Fourthly, he deals with the matter of how a person may be born again.<sup>358</sup> It involved two actions of the Holy Spirit<sup>359</sup> in the life of the penitent. By identifying two actions, Fletcher did not mean these actions were separate; they happened simultaneously.<sup>360</sup> The first action was called justification and the second sanctification. Justification was an act of God by which pardon and imputed righteousness were given to the repentant sinner. It occurred

<sup>352</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 317

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 320 - 328

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 320, 322. Fletcher noted that temperance and justice, with regular attendance at Church and communion, as well as prayer and Bible reading were not infallible signs of regeneration.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 328 - 336

<sup>359</sup> Fletcher emphasises the work of the Holy Spirit in the whole process and describes new birth in terms of being 'baptised by the Holy Ghost' *Ibid.*, p.333.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329. He stated : 'in the same moment that the sinner receives this faith,...he receives the power to love much..'

when the sinner received Jesus Christ into his or her life as Saviour. That this had taken place a person would know because God would fill his or her heart with 'peace and joy in believing' and he or she would know 'dominion over all his [or her] sins'.<sup>361</sup> It was this victory over sin which marked the beginning of the second action, called in the scriptures 'sanctification'.

Fletcher defined sanctification as:

"..that powerful work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of the pardoned sinner, by which he receives power to go on from faith to faith; by which, illuminated more and more to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and renewed day by day in the image of his Saviour, which he had lost in Adam, he feels himself internally 'changed from glory into glory', until he 'loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his strength, and his neighbour as himself', even as Christ loved him. This is the highest point of the sanctification of a believer, and consequently his regeneration is complete."<sup>362</sup>

As is clear from this definition, sanctification was a progressive work.<sup>363</sup>

Although new birth could be described as a 'circumcision of the heart' and a crucifixion of 'the old man', the 'body of sin' nevertheless was not yet destroyed. Sanctification was not in general the business 'of a day nor of a year' it was a work of 'long duration' but new birth marked the beginning of the process.

Having explained new birth in terms of justification and sanctification, Fletcher then related how it could take place in the life of the sinner. The key to the experience, as both the scriptures and the Church had indicated, was 'living faith'.<sup>364</sup> No one could experience such faith unless he or she 'felt his or her need of it'. Here was repentance. But the Father brought this about as the Spirit convinced the individual of his or her sin and its necessary

<sup>361</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 329

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331



punishment. If the contrite sinner responded to the gracious words of invitation from the Saviour he or she would experience the 'sweet assurance' and 'testimony' of the Spirit and thus be 'born again'.

Fletcher concluded with an impassioned plea to his readers to be 'born again'. He warned against 'impatience and unbelief' which, if mixed with an excessive consciousness of sin, could be counterproductive to new birth, creating only discouragement and intense sorrow. The antidote to this was to meditate on the invitations and promises of the God of grace and truth and hold on in expectancy.<sup>365</sup> His final challenge was:

"Let him not go till he blesses you with that faith which justifies, and that sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord. And soon transported from this vale of tears, into the mansion of 'the just made perfect', you shall cast your crown of immortal glory 'at the feet of Him that sitteth upon the throne', and before the Lamb, 'who has redeemed us by his blood; to whom be the blessing, and the honour, and the glory, and the power, for ever and ever!'"<sup>366</sup>

Looking at the three documents it is clear that Fletcher is consumed with a concern for what he regards as wholehearted Christianity. Such Christianity must not simply be seen as a 'reformation of manners' nor must it be viewed as a temporary accommodation with 'indwelling sin'. In Fletcher's opinion neither the sin-ignoring way of Antinomianism nor the grace-ignoring way of Pelagianism came near to presenting the fullness of God's salvation. At the heart of what God offered in Christ was the power of the Holy Spirit to make what was offered experientially real. Although the Spirit had been operative in each dispensation, the dispensation subsequent to Christ's work of redemption had brought a fullness of the Spirit which had not been

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<sup>365</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 334

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336



previously possible. Now everyone could enjoy the fullness of the kingdom of God with its 'righteousness, peace and joy and in the Holy Spirit'. But Fletcher felt too many were living far below such possibilities and this, in his judgment, called for a rediscovery of the 'precious jewel' of *Christian Perfection*. This concept, though much maligned and misunderstood, held nothing contrary to scripture nor the teaching of the Church. Indeed, in contrast to 'Christian Imperfection' it was 'Scriptural Christianity' and avoided the way of the 'easy Antinomian' and the 'busy Pharisee'.

Having now set out what Wesley and Fletcher regarded as their definitive thinking on *Christian Perfection* the concern of the next chapter will be to compare their understanding.

## Chapter 3 Christian Perfection - Wesley and Fletcher compared

### Introduction

Wesley and Fletcher were both undoubtedly concerned with what they perceived to be the very poor quality in the standard of contemporary Christianity.

Fletcher believed that many of those who were called Christians were living below the possibilities even within reach of the 'heathens' without ever considering the possibilities available in the Christian dispensation.<sup>1</sup> In the *Essay on Truth* he spoke of those who were 'nominal' Christians while in the *Discourse on New Birth* he referred to 'half-christians'.<sup>2</sup> Of course, it would be wrong to conclude from this that Fletcher de-christianised anybody who failed to measure up to what might be regarded as his norm for being a Christian. While he warned of the danger of mistaking a 'reformation of manners' for spiritual regeneration and emphasised clearly the necessity of the New Birth, he recognised that despite the absence of what might normally be considered by the believing observer proof of spiritual life such people nevertheless could still be within the community of faith. True, their experience would never be described in terms of the 'full assurance' of faith but neither should it be rejected as faithless. This, of course, was entirely in keeping with his interpretation of the doctrine of the 'gospel dispensations'. However, this being accepted, he nevertheless believed that the potential of grace now available in the Christian dispensation meant that no one, including those 'believers' who were living below par, should miss out on what God had for them. The problem was

<sup>1</sup> Fletcher's *Works*, Vol. IV, p. 92; Chapter 2 Christian Perfection: Fletcher's elaboration, pp. 92 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, p. 304

people did appear to be missing out. He stated in his letter to Charles Wesley:

“...I am ...persuaded that the Spirit and faith which belong to perfect Christianity, are at a very low ebb, even among believers. When the Son of Man cometh to set up his kingdom shall he find Christian faith upon the earth? Yes; but I fear as little as he found of Jewish faith when he came in the flesh.”<sup>3</sup>

With Wesley the same concern can be seen in his introduction to the *Plain Account* where he declared there could be no ‘medium’<sup>4</sup> in being a Christian. As Biblical religion involved the whole person in a total commitment to God it was therefore an ‘absolute impossibility’ to be ‘half a Christian’.<sup>5</sup> By stating this Wesley is not denying what Fletcher has indicated with regard to ‘half-christians’ and both would have accepted the other’s point within the context in which it was made. Wesley, as he indicated, was addressing the ‘serious part of mankind’ with regard to how he came to accept the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* and was concerned to show that the true Christian could not consciously give less than his or her all to God. He quotes with obvious approval the friend who was convinced that the major cause of lack of progress in the spiritual life was the believer’s own ‘coldness, negligence, and unbelief’.<sup>6</sup> Fletcher, on the other hand, was concerned with the broader issue of the operation of the grace of God in the individual’s life. Both men would have agreed that mediocrity had no place in biblical religion and must be rejected. As Wesley and Fletcher saw it, the way forward was summed up in what had become known as *Christian Perfection*.

Of course, just there lay a difficulty. What was *Christian Perfection*? Throughout the *Plain Account*, it would be true to say that Wesley defined

<sup>3</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. 1, p. 167

<sup>4</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, Vol. XI, p. 366

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407 f.

*Christian Perfection* in various ways with no one way being definitive. However, this being said, it is still reasonable to maintain that Wesley's final summary in the *Plain Account* does in fact sum up what he understood to be the very essence of *Christian Perfection* and indeed comes as close as anything to what could be described as a clear-cut definition of *Christian Perfection*, albeit a multi-faceted one.<sup>7</sup> He stated:

"Now let this perfection appear in its native form, and who can speak a word against it? Will any dare to speak against loving the Lord our god with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves? against a renewal of heart, not only in part, but in the whole image of God? Who is he that will open his mouth against being cleansed from all pollution both of flesh and spirit; or against having all the mind that was in Christ, and walking in all things as Christ walked? What man who calls himself a Christian, has the hardiness to object to the devoting, not a part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God? What serious man would oppose the giving God all our heart, and having one design ruling all our tempers? I say, again, let this perfection appear in its own shape, and who will fight against it?"<sup>8</sup>

With regard to Fletcher, it is easier to identify one particular definition because quite soon in the *Last Check* he begins by defining *Christian Perfection* in the following terms:

"...the maturity of grace and holiness, which established, adult believers attain to under the Christian dispensation..."<sup>9</sup>

Is it fair to conclude that all that Wesley's multi-faceted definition had intended to be in *Christian Perfection* was included in Fletcher's 'maturity of grace and holiness'? Or, put another way, when Wesley and Fletcher are compared, are they defining *Christian Perfection* in the same way? In order to get some conclusions with regard to this matter this chapter will consider the following:

<sup>7</sup> This is the position taken in Chapter 1 of this thesis, *Christian Perfection: Wesley's exposition*.

<sup>8</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 444 f.

<sup>9</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 415

**Where Wesley and Fletcher agree**  
**Where Wesley and Fletcher counter criticisms**  
**Where Wesley and Fletcher differ.**

**The agreements**

Wesley and Fletcher shared many points of similarity with regard to the whole concept of *Christian Perfection*. Both men, while not completely comfortable with the word *perfection* itself, nevertheless defended its use and the sense in which they understood it as being biblical. Wesley stated:

"There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in scripture."<sup>10</sup>

Fletcher argued that the word 'perfection' with its derivatives occurred as 'frequently as most words in scripture' and not infrequently having the same meaning as he had intended.<sup>11</sup> Like Wesley, he called on the Old and New Testaments to support his arguments against those who denied the doctrine. He also saw them as providing encouragement for those who were seeking perfection.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, both men argued that it was just because the standard of *Christian Perfection* had not been set according to the scriptures that some Christians had ended up being too complacent while others were being driven to despair.<sup>13</sup>

It was crucially important therefore to Wesley and Fletcher that the doctrine should be clearly understood. They were convinced that a huge part of the controversy surrounding the concept of *Christian Perfection* was due in no

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<sup>10</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 441. With regard to the word 'perfection' the key text is probably Jesus' words, 'Therefore ye shall be perfect as your father who is in heaven is perfect' Matthew 5:48 though there are others. The idea itself has in Wesley's mind a much wider basis in scripture; chapter 1, *Christian Perfection: Wesley's exposition* pp. 13 -21.

<sup>11</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 414

<sup>12</sup> Chapter 2, *Christian Perfection: Fletcher's elaboration* pp. 56 -62; 68-72.

<sup>13</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 170; *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 397



small measure to a lack of a proper understanding of the concept. Wesley bemoaned the fact that people were prejudiced against the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* because it was 'still misunderstood, and consequently misrepresented',<sup>14</sup> something which he, of course, had sought to correct in the *Plain Account*. Fletcher argued that it was 'absolutely necessary' to 'get tolerably clear ideas of this perfection'.<sup>15</sup> He maintained that had his opponent, Richard Hill, properly understood the doctrine he would have no more poured 'contempt upon the doctrine than upon the oracles of God'.<sup>16</sup> Emphatically, both men stressed the relative nature of *Christian Perfection*. Fletcher liked the phrase from Archbishop Leighton, 'imperfect perfection'<sup>17</sup> which, although contradictory in any normal understanding of the word *perfection*, captured for him the relative nature of *Christian Perfection*. He maintained that the Fall had so 'debilitated'<sup>18</sup> humanity that despite the wonder of salvation 'all manner of imperfections' still remained within the believer while he or she continued in the body. Such imperfections would, if God called him or her to account 'according to the Christless law given to Adam before the Fall', result in damnation. But God the Father did not judge his children in the Christian dispensation according to the standards demanded of 'the immortal Adam in paradise' nor 'the sleepless angels in heaven'.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the Christian was subject to the evangelical law of Christ which, although calling for *perfection*, fully recognised the weakened state of humanity because of the Fall<sup>20</sup> and therefore called not for 'angelic' nor 'paradisiacal' *perfection* but for 'imperfect' *perfection*. In acknowledging that *perfection* could be 'set too high', Wesley by implication also recognised the

<sup>14</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 378

<sup>15</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 170

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. V, p. 413

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417

relative nature of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>21</sup> His recognition that the believer while he or she remained on this earth still lived in a 'shattered corruptible body'<sup>22</sup> was quite explicit. Here, whatever the believer's experience of God<sup>23</sup> it would always be limited by that body<sup>24</sup> until the 'mortal puts on immortality'.<sup>25</sup>

Not unconnected with the relative nature of *Christian Perfection* was the stress on its dynamic character. Wesley was convinced of the necessity of the daily on-going work of transformation by the Spirit in the life of every believer into the Father's image.<sup>26</sup> There was no point on the Christian pilgrimage at which the believer could ever consider himself or herself to have arrived. *Christian Perfection*, however contradictory it appeared to be, was 'both preceded and followed by a gradual work' and was always capable of improvement.<sup>27</sup> As Wesley saw it, the advantage for the believer who had experienced being 'perfected in love' was not that he or she had become the finished article but that he or she would now 'grow in grace' more quickly than before. Such growth would continue 'not only till death, but to all eternity'.<sup>28</sup> Fletcher also believed that there was no holiness on either side of eternity which did not admit of growth. The term 'progressive perfection of grace'<sup>29</sup> encapsulated this for him. As with Wesley, he maintained that the believer should experience growth from conversion 'to all eternity'. He reasoned that if the Christian can be 'changed from glory into glory' on this earth even though seeing God 'darkly' how much better

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<sup>21</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 397

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 419, 383

<sup>23</sup> As Wesley stated '...neither love nor "the unction of the Holy One" makes us infallible' *Ibid.*, p. 417. In this sense it was true 'there was no perfection possible on earth.'

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 374, 417, 442

<sup>25</sup> I Corinthians 15:54

<sup>26</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 379

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 374, 442

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402

<sup>29</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 423

the prospects when he or she sees God 'face to face' in heaven.<sup>30</sup>

Growth, of course, in the minds of both men required human effort as well as the divine energy. Neither man would have understood himself to have raised any doubt that salvation was anything other than all of grace. Wesley had argued that it was only through the believer's union with Christ that he or she may dare to make any claim to holiness.<sup>31</sup> Fletcher, quoting the words in the letter to the Philippians 'God worketh in you to will and to do',<sup>32</sup> clearly emphasised the same point. Yet despite this, they both felt that there had to be a place for a human response, a place which in no way denied the necessity of the grace of God but a place which recognised human responsibility. Fletcher pointed again to Philippians where the complete section reads:

"...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God that worketh in you according to his good pleasure both to will and to do."<sup>33</sup>

Separation of the truths encapsulated in this passage,<sup>34</sup> truths consistent with the whole of the New Testament, had, in Fletcher's opinion, resulted in the false emphasis that 'free grace must do all' or in the equally false stress that 'pharisaic activity..will do most, if not all..<sup>35</sup> Fletcher maintained the path between lay in a 'faith working through love',<sup>36</sup> a path which offered the correct balance between faith and works avoiding the twin evils of antinomianism and pharisaism. If, then, the believer would 'go on to perfection', he or she must be actively involved in its pursuit. Wesley in

<sup>30</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 426. see also 1 Corinthians 13:12; Hymn: *Love divine, all loves excelling*, *Hymns and Psalms*, [London: Methodist Publishing House, 1983], 267 v. 3 line 5. [Hereafter cited as *Hymns and Psalms*]

<sup>31</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 417

<sup>32</sup> Philippians 2: 13. quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 171

<sup>33</sup> Philippians 2: 12 c-13. part of which is quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 171

<sup>34</sup> Wesley also referred to this passage in the *Plain account* and in *Notes*.

<sup>35</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 171

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171 f.

answering the question of how one should wait for *Christian Perfection* had stated:

“Not in careless indifference, or indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God...It is true, we receive it by simple faith: but God does not, will not, give that faith unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which he has ordained.”<sup>37</sup>

He felt that even those of his brethren in the Conference who had differed with him on *Christian Perfection* would nevertheless agree it was a goal after which every believer should be ‘continually pressing’.<sup>38</sup> Fletcher spoke of having a good resolve to get to the ‘Canaan of Perfect Love’.<sup>39</sup> Clarity in understanding *Christian Perfection*, aided no doubt by reflecting on the commands and promises given in the Scriptures,<sup>40</sup> along with repentance, self-denial and corporate prayer were, in Fletcher’s mind, all part of the human resolve in seeking to go on with God.<sup>41</sup> Of course, the human factor was also apparent in the on-going maintenance of *Christian Perfection* as Wesley and Fletcher both gave ‘advice’ on how the experience should be maintained.<sup>42</sup>

### **The answering of criticisms**

What of the particular difficulties? Both men were keenly aware of the difficulties involved in suggesting that the Christian could know freedom from sin while here on earth. As Wesley saw it, his opponents did not

<sup>37</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, Vol. XI, p. 402 f.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388

<sup>39</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. VI, p. 178. see also Hymn: *God of all power, and truth, and grace. Hymns and Psalms* 562 v. 5 line 4

<sup>40</sup> As we have seen both men understood the whole of the Bible to contain on the one hand commands to walk in the way of *Christian Perfection* and on the other hand promises of power to achieve such a walk.

<sup>41</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. VI, p p. 183-187

<sup>42</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, Vol. XI. p p. 427 - 441. *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. VI, p p. 207 - 224



question the description of perfection but objected to his insistence that it could be experienced 'on earth'.<sup>43</sup> Fletcher, accused of being at variance with his own Church's doctrinal standards, not to mention the scriptures, defended himself by arguing that freedom from sin did not mean the total erasure of the 'poisonous seeds of mortality'<sup>44</sup> rendering the Christian sinless and without the power to sin while still here on earth. The idea that a believer could ever get beyond temptation and free from the possibility of sinning was, as Fletcher had argued, a common misconception of the opponents of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>45</sup> *Christian Perfection* was to be seen rather in terms of release from 'indwelling sin' so enabling the Christian to have the potential<sup>46</sup> to experience victory over the 'sinful lusts of the flesh', 'unloving diabolical tempers', and 'any moral opposition to the will of God'.<sup>47</sup> This possibility of victory over 'inbred sin' was an ever present reality but it was to be experienced in the arena of human living where the world, the flesh and the devil were also an ever present reality.<sup>48</sup> In biblical terms, as Fletcher perceived it, this was what was meant by 'walking in the light'<sup>49</sup> and not walking 'after the flesh'<sup>50</sup> and in his own terms could be described as 'evangelically sinless'.<sup>51</sup> Wesley was not dissimilar. It is true that Wesley

<sup>43</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 374

<sup>44</sup> Fletcher wrote "If by the infection of nature [Mr. Hill] understands, the natural ignorance which has infected our understanding, the natural forgetfulness which has affected our memory, the inbred debility of all our mental powers, the poisonous seeds of mortality which infect all men from head to foot, and hinder the strongest believers from serving God with all the fervour they would be capable of were they not fallen from paradisiacal perfection, under the curse of the body sentenced to die, and 'dead because of sin;' if Mr Hill, I say understands this by 'the infection of nature' we believe that such an infection, with all the natural, innocent appetites of the flesh, remains, not only in those whom the scriptures call babes in Christ, but also in fathers..." *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 439 f.

<sup>45</sup> Fletcher had quoted his opponents as saying: '...if sin is dead what need have we to mortify it?' *Ibid.*, p. 429

<sup>46</sup> The fullness of the Christian dispensation offered the believer the power but Fletcher believed that power had to be appropriated.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 440

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429

<sup>49</sup> 1 John 1:7

<sup>50</sup> Romans 8:4

<sup>51</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 419



could be seen to be adopting a much more static view of victory over sin than Fletcher. In considering the question as to whether or not the children of 'perfect Christians' could be born in sin, Wesley had replied somewhat enigmatically:

"It is a possible, but not a probable case; I doubt whether it ever was or ever will be."<sup>52</sup>

But he then goes on to reject such an idea by arguing that sin anyway is not passed on by immediate generation but rather through solidarity with Adam. However, leaving this aside the same dynamic approach can likewise be seen in Wesley. Also appealing to the Johannine statement about 'walking in the light',<sup>53</sup> Wesley had argued that the Christian was 'so far perfect as not to commit sin.'<sup>54</sup> But this did not mean that the Christian could not sin. It was only as the Christian 'walked in the light', something which in itself was solely possible through grace, that he or she could experience freedom from what might be called conscious sin. Yet neither did it mean, however ridiculous it might appear, that the Christian was without sin! As long as the Christian remained in a corruptible body, 'involuntary sin' and unconscious sin would persist.<sup>55</sup> It was only through union with Christ that the Christian could be assured of his or her continued acceptability before God.<sup>56</sup> Even the 'best of men' outside of union with Christ would be 'nothing but sin, darkness, hell'<sup>57</sup> but such were now more convinced than ever of their 'need of Christ in all his offices'.<sup>58</sup> So Wesley stated:

"It follows, that the most perfect have the continual need of the

<sup>52</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 400

<sup>53</sup> 1 John 1:7. See also John 12:35 f.

<sup>54</sup> *Wesley's Works*, p. 376

<sup>55</sup> Presumably Wesley would have seen the involuntary transgression of an unknown divine law as unconscious sin but how he would have defined the involuntary transgression of a known law I am not at all sure! see: *Ibid.*, p. 396

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443

merits of Christ, even for their actual<sup>59</sup> transgressions, and may say for themselves as for their brethren, 'Forgive us our trespasses'.<sup>1160</sup>

Therefore, the Lord's prayer and those prayers in the liturgy which pray for forgiveness and cleansing were not superfluous.<sup>61</sup> Despite the language which appeared to state unambiguously that *Christian Perfection* offered a complete removal of sin, implying the extraction of the cause of sin, both men wanted to qualify such an understanding.

The matter of whether *Christian Perfection* was to be experienced instantaneously or as a gradual process was apparently another difficulty. Fletcher stated that many sincere but puzzled perfectionists had asked, 'Is *Christian Perfection* to be instantaneously brought down to us or are we to gradually to grow up into it?'<sup>62</sup> Wesley, in the question and answer style which he sometimes adopted, had asked, 'Is this death to sin and renewal in love gradual or instantaneous?'<sup>63</sup> and again 'Do [the justified] not gradually die to sin and grow in grace, till at, or perhaps a little before death, God perfects them in love?'<sup>64</sup> Clearly there were those, even within the Methodist movement, who while accepting that *Christian Perfection* ought to be the goal of every Christian, a goal to which each believer should by grace be daily drawing nearer, had difficulty in accepting an instantaneous

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<sup>59</sup> The use of the word 'actual' had raised questions in people's minds. In a letter to Wesley on 26 January 1773 Sarah Crosby states: "...there is one word which I have heard many express their dislike of, nor can I say that I like it. You say, 'The most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ, even for their *actual transgressions*' 'Would it not have been less exceptional in some other words? As, *for their transgressions through ignorance*, which I humbly presume, dear Sir, is your meaning?" [*H.M.C.G.B.*, Vol. IV, p. 178.] Whether or not she did presume right is open to question. The context in which it comes suggests that she did but on the other hand Wesley did not change the wording and there is a certain ambivalence.

<sup>60</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 395

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419, 446. See also *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p.p. 440-447

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 172

<sup>63</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 402

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423

deliverance much before death, if at all.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, Wesley and Fletcher were convinced that such a deliverance was indeed possible. In a final summary in the *Plain Account*, after having reviewed the whole subject of *Christian Perfection* yet again, Wesley concluded, among other things, that the evidence that an instantaneous change had occurred in 'some believers' was undeniable.<sup>66</sup> Even the fact that other witnesses claimed only to have experienced deliverance gradually was not necessarily proof positive that they had not had an instantaneous change. Wesley argued that it might simply be a failure on the part of the individual to perceive the instant in which the change had occurred.<sup>67</sup> Fletcher strongly objected to the teaching which appeared to him to offer the believer in this life nothing more than the prospect of a 'slow gradual destruction of sin' with the final destruction coming at death.<sup>68</sup> He reasoned that if at the instant of death God must finally effect the complete removal of inbred sin anyhow, for 'without holiness no man can see the Lord', then why should it be deemed impossible that God could or would not effect such a change at anytime before the instant of death? If it could and must take place at the instant of death why not five minutes before death? Why not five weeks? Why not five months? Why not five years or whatever?

However, this being said, neither Wesley nor Fletcher wanted the concept of a gradual removal of indwelling sin to be excluded from their scheme of things nor considered as invalid in the believer's experience. Fletcher argued that it was just as wrong to deny that the "imperfect believer" could be 'gradually perfected' in love as it was to deny the possibility of what might be regarded 'comparatively speaking' as the imperfect believer being

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<sup>65</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 388

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p.132

'instantaneously fixed in perfect love'.<sup>69</sup> The use of the word 'comparatively' is significant because Fletcher, in his overall understanding of how the grace of God operated in the life of the individual, believed that it was in the very nature of things that change, however dramatic and apparently sudden, always implied a 'gradual transition'.<sup>70</sup> So the matter of the instantaneous versus the gradual was not really as clear cut as it might at first appear. In his *Discourse on New Birth*, Fletcher recognised that the work of sanctification was progressive; something which in general was the work of a 'long duration'.<sup>71</sup> He had not wanted to concede any ground to those who had maintained that 'indwelling sin' would remain in the believer until death, a concession which, in his opinion, could only have encouraged antinomianism and discouraged any notion of the possibility that it could be otherwise. He was, of course, also conscious of the opposite danger, in that the believer might seek to be 'perfected in love' through human effort. Consequently, he emphasised the importance of looking every moment by faith for the fulfilment of the 'promise of perfection'.<sup>72</sup> But alongside this emphasis, and indeed to some extent part of it,<sup>73</sup> there was also a recognition of the on-going work which preceded the crisis moment.<sup>74</sup> Fletcher in an illuminating passage stated:

"...the most evangelical method of following after the perfection to which we are immediately called is, that of seeking it now... But in the mean time, we should do the work of faith, and repeat our internal and external acts of obedience, with as much earnestness and faithfulness, according to our present power, as if we were sure to enter into rest merely by a diligent use of our talents, and a faithful exertion of the powers which divine grace has bestowed upon us."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 173

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 19

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, p. 330

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 178

<sup>73</sup> This can be seen in the way he encouraged people to 'go on to perfection'

<sup>74</sup> He, of course, also stressed the on going nature of perfection after the crisis.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 178



Clearly the 'mean time' could vary from individual to individual but whether the believer was 'made perfect in love' suddenly or slowly for Fletcher both ways were good.<sup>76</sup>

Wesley also encouraged every believer to seek to 'go on to perfection' convinced as he was that it could be received in an 'instant' and always holding out the hope that such an 'instant' could be now.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, he clearly acknowledged the place of gradual transition in the whole process. To the question 'Do... the [justified] not gradually die to sin and grow in grace, till at, or perhaps a little before, death God perfects them in love?', he replied:

"I believe this is the case of most but not all. God usually gives a considerable time for men to receive light, to grow in grace, to do and suffer his will, before they are either justified or sanctified... But we know likewise, that God may, with man's good leave, 'cut short the work', in whatever degree he pleases, and do the usual work of years in a moment: So that one may affirm the work is gradual, another it is instantaneous, without any manner of contradiction."<sup>78</sup>

Wesley, presumably working out of his pastoral experience, must have felt that growth in grace came about in the believer's life more often gradually. While plainly not wanting to limit God's grace in any way nor indeed deny his Sovereignty<sup>79</sup> nor no doubt like Fletcher allow the opponents of *Christian Perfection* any hostage to fortune, Wesley believed that experience and scripture<sup>80</sup> supported the view that *Christian Perfection* was constantly preceded 'by a gradual work'.<sup>81</sup> So the image used by the writer to the

<sup>76</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p.172

<sup>77</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 382 f.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 423. Fletcher actually quotes this section from the *Plain Account* more fully. See: *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 168 f.

<sup>79</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 407

<sup>80</sup> He states: "It need not be... proved by forty texts of Scripture... that there is a gradual work of God in the soul..." *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 423

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 442



Hebrews of labouring to enter into 'rest'<sup>82</sup> and seen by both Wesley<sup>83</sup> and Fletcher to point to the experience of *Christian Perfection* was definitely quite relevant. Clearly there was no way in which a person, who was seeking to go on with God, would succeed apart from the spiritual disciplines.<sup>84</sup> While it was true that any advance in the Christian life was ultimately a matter of 'simple faith', this did not exempt the seeker from diligence on the way.<sup>85</sup> Again, in Wesley's mind, as noted earlier, there was also a practical reason as to why God generally did a gradual work in the life of the believer. He maintained that such was the extent and depth of the sinfulness of the human heart that God in order to protect his child from being completely crushed, only revealed the full measure of the problem gradually.<sup>86</sup> Wesley also believed that there was no real contradiction between those who claimed that the work was gradual and those who claimed it was instantaneous. As with Fletcher the principal concern, whether of the gradual or of the instantaneous way, was that the end result should be the death blow to indwelling sin within the believer and his or her full renewal in love. However, accepting the legitimacy of both ways as a means to the goal of *Christian Perfection* did not really remove the difficulty of whether or not there was a precise moment in time when the believer going along the pathway of the gradual could actually be said to have reached his or her goal in an 'instant'. Wesley in the final analysis appears to accept that there must be just such an 'instant'. He asserted that 'if ever sin ceases, there must be a last moment of its existence and a first moment

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<sup>82</sup> Hebrews 3:11, 18.

<sup>83</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 381 f.

<sup>84</sup> Here Wesley would be thinking of obedience to the commandments, taking up the cross daily, prayer and fasting, close attendance on all the ordinances of God. See: *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 402 f.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402 f.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381

of our deliverance from it.'<sup>87</sup> Any failure on the part of the person to recognise when this had occurred may be due simply to a matter of perception. By inference, Fletcher, in including exactly the same words from the *Plain Account* clearly supported Wesley<sup>88</sup> though his attack on Matthew Henry in relation to gradual sanctification was quite explicit.<sup>89</sup> Yet how can the gradual and the instantaneous be accommodated within the same system without being contradictory? Wesley, in a final review in the *Plain Account*, could well be reflecting such a difficulty when he imagined someone asking 'But is it in itself instantaneous or not?' For Wesley and Fletcher the apparent contradiction was held in tension by setting the 'instant' within the context of the gradual. Both men had insisted that the 'moment' was always preceded and followed by growth, a process which they had stressed would go on right through into eternity.<sup>90</sup> Wesley had emphasised the importance of the 'now' in that while a person may have experienced the benefits of *Christian Perfection* it was still possible to lose them. He argued that only on a moment by moment basis could even the 'holiest of men' be and remain holy. Except the believer received a 'supply every moment nothing but unholiness would remain'.<sup>91</sup> This in itself was, of course, dependent on the atonement of Christ. Indeed, contrary to the accusation that *Christian Perfection* only encouraged in its adherents the belief that the atonement was superfluous, Wesley insisted their language was rather:

"...Every moment, Lord, I want the merit of thy death!"<sup>92</sup>

<sup>87</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 442

<sup>88</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 168

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-132

<sup>90</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p p. 402, 423, 442; *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p p. 168 f f., 221 f.

<sup>91</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 417

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443

Evidently it was this moment by moment emphasis which Jane Cooper recognised when, in her testimony to having experienced *Christian Perfection*, one of only two named testimonies which Wesley felt significant enough to include in the *Plain Account* of those who had claimed the experience,<sup>93</sup> she stated:

“...I know it is by faith I stand; and that watching unto prayer must be the guard of faith. I am happy in God this moment, and I believe for the next...”<sup>94</sup>

Perhaps Fletcher may not be quoted on this aspect quite as freely as Wesley; nevertheless the importance of the ‘moment’ or the ‘now’ can be clearly seen. He also accepted that the believer could only attain and maintain the experience of *Christian Perfection* as by faith he or she remained in Christ.<sup>95</sup> There was no point along the Christian pathway where the believer could ever feel that he or she was exempt from the danger of falling.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, Fletcher concluded his advice to ‘Perfect Christians’ with the words of Paul to the Philippians where Christian experience is seen not in terms of a static past but rather in terms of an ever on-going dynamic future.<sup>97</sup> In this way Wesley and Fletcher evidently felt they had given a satisfactory explanation for the apparently conflicting positions of those who claimed to have entered gradually into the experience of *Christian Perfection* as against those who claimed the experience was instantaneous.

### **The differences**

Moving from the difficulties of *Christian Perfection* as seen by others to the

<sup>93</sup> The other being that of Arvid Gradin. *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 369 f.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411

<sup>95</sup> See for example: *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 433; Vol. VI, p. 181 f.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 208 f.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221 f.

question of difference between Wesley and Fletcher, the *Last Check* does appear to suggest that there had been some divergence of opinion between the two men. According to Fletcher, the apparent difficulty between Wesley and himself concerned a difference of expression though he does go on to dismiss it as being merely 'verbal' and having no real substance. Fletcher identified this variation of expression in his use of the terms 'baptism or outpouring of the Spirit' in connection with the experience of *Christian Perfection*, terms which had apparently been interpreted by some as indicating a new doctrine.<sup>98</sup> Whatever others had thought Fletcher believed his terms were simply a different set of clothes for the same truth, though decidedly more scriptural having the backing of some of the prophets as well as John the Baptist, the four evangelists and Christ himself. However, when some of the available correspondence regarding Fletcher's work on perfection is considered, there are indications that this could have been more than simply a matter of expression. For example, Wesley, on the 22 March 1775, obviously having read Fletcher's long awaited work on *Perfection*, wrote to him from Northwich:

"It seems our views on *Christian Perfection* are a little different, though not opposite. It is certain every babe in Christ has received the Holy Ghost, and the spirit witnesses that he is a child of God. But he has not obtained Christian perfection. Perhaps you have not considered St. John's threefold distinction of Christian believers: little children, young men, and fathers. All of these had received the Holy Ghost; but only the fathers were perfected in love."<sup>99</sup>

This letter seems to infer that, because Fletcher had dressed *Christian Perfection* in the clothes of 'baptism or outpouring of the Spirit', such terms might then be seen to belong solely to the experience of *Christian Perfection*. This, as Wesley understood it, was not the case. He pointed out

<sup>98</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 190 f.

<sup>99</sup> *Letters*, Vol. VI, p. 146



that while all believers could not be said to have been 'perfected in love', they all nevertheless had received the Spirit.

Without doubt Fletcher's use of the concept of dispensations had highlighted the age of the Spirit and resulted in an emphasis on the work of the Spirit in his writings. He had maintained that the Christian dispensation was unique in that it offered to the believer a fullness of experience which had been previously unavailable.<sup>100</sup> This fullness of experience was quite clearly linked to the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit.<sup>101</sup> This did not mean that other dispensations had been without the Spirit<sup>102</sup> but it did mean that the Spirit had not yet come with the power of Pentecost, a power which as promised in both the Old and New Testaments would be greater than anything yet experienced. Jesus himself had highlighted this 'outpouring of the Spirit' by referring to it as the 'promise of the Father' ensuring that it shone out among the other promises<sup>103</sup> and marking it as the 'glorious dispensation of divine grace'.<sup>104</sup> According to Fletcher this new release of the Spirit would make the experience of *Christian Perfection* a reality. He reasoned that the whole foundation of the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* was based on 'the privileges of the Christian dispensation in its fullness', privileges dependent upon the promised outpouring of the Spirit.<sup>105</sup> He, therefore, found it difficult to see how his use of the terms 'outpouring or baptism of the Spirit' indicated in any sense a new doctrine, if anything, as has already been noted, he felt his terms were more scriptural.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, he also pointed out that Wesley too, had described the

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<sup>100</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 37

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116 f.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 163 f.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 109 footnote

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 191

Christian dispensation<sup>107</sup> as having a greater measure of the Holy Spirit than other dispensations. In the *Plain Account* he had stated:

“Has there not been a larger measure of the Holy Spirit given under the Gospel, than under the Jewish dispensation? If not, in what sense was the Spirit not given before Christ was glorified? (John vii. 39.)”<sup>108</sup>

While Wesley himself at this point does not elaborate on this statement, Fletcher, quoting it, clearly sees it as an endorsement of his understanding. That Fletcher is not being too presumptuous seems right when Wesley, in the sermon *Christian Perfection* plainly links the coming of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost with the power to experience and live in what was called *Christian Perfection*. He stated:

“And ‘when the day of Pentecost was fully come’ then first it was that they who ‘waited for the promise of the Father’ were made more than conquerors over sin by the Holy Ghost given unto them...Those who have duly considered these things must allow that the privileges of Christians are in no wise to be measured by what the Old Testament records concerning those who were under the Jewish dispensation, seeing the fullness of times is now come, the Holy Ghost is now given, the great salvation of God is brought unto men by the revelation of Jesus Christ.”<sup>109</sup>

Fletcher also quoted part of this passage in the *Essay of Truth*. Equally supportive and also cited in the *Essay on Truth* was Wesley’s sermon on *Scriptural Christianity*.<sup>110</sup> Seen by Fletcher as not only being in line with his emphasis on the Spirit but also in keeping with his understanding of the dispensations,<sup>111</sup> this sermon stressed the point that normal Christianity was, and always would be from beginning to end, the work of God effected through the Spirit. Certainly Fletcher also placed the priority here. Yet

<sup>107</sup> Fletcher quotes from Wesley to show that he accepts the concept of dispensations. See: *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. IV, p. 114 f.

<sup>108</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, Vol. XI, p. 408

<sup>109</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, (BE), Vol. 2, Sermon 40, pp. 110 f.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Sermon 4, pp. 161-165

<sup>111</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. IV, pp. 108 f. footnote, 116 f. footnote.

Wesley in this sermon could not be said to have singled out the experience of *Christian Perfection* as the particular blessing of the dispensation of the Spirit. Rather to be 'filled with the Holy Ghost' belonged to Christianity in its entirety not just one particular aspect of it. Whereas Fletcher, on the other hand, acknowledged the fact that in the *Essay on Truth* he had singled out 'the dispensation of the Holy Ghost ... to be the grand characteristic of *Christian Perfection*'.<sup>112</sup> Yet in acknowledging this fact he did express uncertainty about it. Of course, it has to be said that Fletcher also used the phrase 'baptism of the Holy Ghost' to refer to the whole work of God.<sup>113</sup> Quite specifically he called the believer, as well as the unconverted, to experience the 'baptism of the Holy Ghost'.<sup>114</sup> Alongside this it might also be said that Wesley too, equated *Christian Perfection* with the fullness of the Spirit. In the *Plain Account* he speaks of those who are 'perfected in love' as being 'full of his Spirit'.<sup>115</sup> For those who are in the experience of *Christian Perfection*, he recommends among other things 'deep and frequent consideration' on the 'fullness of God and that of the blessed Spirit'.<sup>116</sup> Similarly in the same source he quoted with approval the hymn which included the verse:

"The sanctifying Spirit pour,  
To quench my thirst and wash me clean,  
Now Saviour let the gracious shower  
Descend and make me pure from sin."<sup>117</sup>

Again, in the *Plain Account*, Wesley links the ongoing experience of

<sup>112</sup> John Fletcher, Madeley, 14 August 1774, to Charles Wesley, ms. in "Fletcher Volume", p. 50, Methodist Archives and Research Center, John Rylands Library, The University of Manchester. [Hereafter cited as "MARC"].

<sup>113</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 464 f.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 465

<sup>115</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 403 f. See also the letter from a friend included by Wesley in the *Plain Account*. *Ibid.*, pp. 407 f.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 435 f.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385 f.

*Christian Perfection* with being 'sealed' with the 'Spirit of promise'.<sup>118</sup> Here *Christian Perfection*, described as being 'renewed in love', is seen as the on-going work of the Spirit where the believer experiences yet fuller assurance of God's promises and greater transformation into God's likeness.<sup>119</sup> It would appear, therefore, that Fletcher was right in dismissing the difference as having no real substance. Certainly the evidence does suggest that Fletcher took Wesley's initial criticism on this matter to heart and that he attempted to harmonise any apparent difference. In a letter addressed to Charles Wesley and evidently including a revised manuscript of his treatise on *Christian Perfection* he wrote:

"I give you carte blanche to add, or top off: but to none but you. Your brother saw it as he went to Ireland and I believe he approved of it in general; I hope you see it improved, as I have made many alterations..."<sup>120</sup>

Evidence that the alterations had met with approval seems to come in Wesley's letter to Fletcher on 18 August 1775 when he wrote:

"I have now received all your papers, and here and there made some small corrections... I do not perceive that you have granted too much, or that there is any difference between us. The Address to the Perfect I approve of most, and I think it will have good effect."<sup>121</sup>

In Wesley's mind also it would seem that what had been a 'little' difference

<sup>118</sup> Wesley refers to Ephesians 1: 13 which reads: "In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit."

<sup>119</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 423 f. In relation to this emphasis on the Spirit Wesley's attitude to Montanus should also be noted. He considered Montanus as someone who had been misunderstood by the early Church. In his opinion, Montanus was a real scriptural Christian, indeed possibly one of the 'holiest men' in the 2nd century. His only crime, according to Wesley, was to call the Church back to real Christianity. Given that the Montanists 'stood for the conviction that the Spirit was as active in the contemporary Church as at the beginning' Wesley's attitude is interesting. See, *Wesleys Works*, (BE) Vol. 1, pp. 76, 360; Vol. 2, pp. 461, 555; *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 485 f; Wright, D. F., *The Montanists*, in Dowley, T., (ed) *The History of Christianity*, [Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1977], p. 87

<sup>120</sup> John Fletcher, Madeley, 21 May 1775, in ms. "Fletcher Volume", p. 51, "MARC".

<sup>121</sup> *Letters*, Vol. VI, p. 37



had now disappeared. Yet more recent thinking believes that in this variation lay the beginnings of a shift in Methodism from a Christocentric emphasis to a Pneumatocentric emphasis, a shift which ultimately led to the birth of the Pentecostal movement.<sup>122</sup> While this is a matter of historical judgment, it does seem fair to say that from the documents studied Fletcher did not intend such a shift of emphasis nor did Wesley see it as such.

In conclusion then, comparing the evidence presented so far, it would seem reasonable to maintain that, whatever subsequent investigations have suggested, Wesley and Fletcher understood themselves to be in complete agreement about the essential content of *Christian Perfection*.

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<sup>122</sup> Dayton, Donald W., *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, [New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1987]

## Chapter 4 Christian Perfection - The problems examined

### Introduction

What are the problem areas of *Christian Perfection*? Broadly speaking *Christian Perfection* can be seen as presenting three major problems, namely:

1. A problem with definitions
2. A problem with time
3. A problem with experience

### A Problem with definitions

Here the key words are 'perfection' and 'sin'. Clearly Wesley and Fletcher were aware of this difficulty and sought to offer explanations but questions continued to persist as they still do today.

### Perfection

'Wesley's problem' writes Colin Williams 'is how to define a perfection that is imperfect..'.<sup>1</sup> Yet in essence this is what he attempted to do. As Fletcher summed it up: *Christian Perfection* or *Perfect Love* was 'imperfect perfection'. But right down to the present day the seemingly illogical nature of such a phrase has for many made the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* a nonsense from the start. Perfection by its very nature, it is argued, allows for no reduction. It can only be seen in terms of the perfectibility of human nature which might be defined as 'that which has no flaw in it, that which is complete, that which is consistent, that which is sound'.<sup>2</sup> Such perfectibility, it is maintained, is impossible in this life for it fails on the rock of human

<sup>1</sup> Williams, Colin W., *John Wesley's Theology Today*, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Newman, J.H., *A Short Road to Perfection in Meditations and Devotions*, [London: 1894] part II, p. 382.

fallibility. Perfection will only be possible in heaven. Any attempts, therefore, to narrow the meaning of the word, such as have been made by Wesley and Fletcher, have, at best, been regarded as inadequate and at worst, evil. Dr Benjamin B. Warfield (1851- 1921), regarded as the last great theologian of the conservative Presbyterians at Princeton Theological Seminary, and highly influential in the thinking which rejected any kind of Perfection, wrote:

"Nothing can be more important than that the conception of perfection be maintained at its height... The habit of conceiving of perfection as admitting of many imperfections—moral imperfections, glossed as infirmities, errors and inadvertences—not only lowers the standard of perfection and with it the height of our aspirations, but corrupts our hearts, dulls our discrimination of right and wrong, and betrays us into satisfaction with attainments which are very far from satisfactory. [Such compromises] lull men to sleep with a sense of attainments not really made; cut the nerve of effort in the midst of the race; and tempt men to accept imperfect perfection as perfection—which is no less than to say that evil is good."<sup>3</sup>

Regardless, then, of how Wesley, Fletcher or their successors might seek to define and defend perfection as 'imperfect perfection', if the word is to be retained at all, the plain meaning surely must be that a person can experience a 'finished flawlessness'<sup>4</sup> in this life. Anything less is a diminution of the word and should not be called perfection. Yet the matter is not quite as clear cut.

The fact is the word 'perfection' has been and is used quite justifiably in more than one way. As Professor John Passmore in his book *The Perfectibility of Man* points out, the question of what is meant by perfection should not be considered as being merely obstructive but crucial in understanding any claim to human perfectibility. From a philosophical approach he considers the various possibilities in defining the word:

<sup>3</sup> Warfield, B. B., *Perfectionism*, [Oxford: University Press, 1931] Vol. II, pp. 457 f.

<sup>4</sup> Wood, A. S., *Love Excluding Sin: Wesley's doctrine of Sanctification*, [The Wesley Fellowship, n.d.], Occasional Paper No. 1.

**Technical Perfection:** there is some task in which each and every man can perfect himself technically.

**Obedientary Perfection:** he is capable of wholly subordinating himself to God's will.

**Teleological Perfection:** he can attain to his natural end.

**Immaculate Perfection:** he can be entirely free from any moral defect.

**Metaphysical Perfection:** he can make himself a being to whom nothing is lacking.

**Aesthetic Perfection:** he can make himself a being who is harmonious and orderly.

**Exemplary Perfection:** he can live in the manner of an ideally perfect human being.

**Deiform Perfection:** he can become godlike.<sup>5</sup>

In considering these possibilities, the point is not whether Passmore has exhausted all the possibilities or is indeed correct in his definitions. It is rather that the word 'perfection' need not always be understood in absolute terms but can still be legitimately used when it is being defined in terms something less than perfection. So, for example, the word can be used in everyday language in the sense of being technically perfect as when the B.B.C. commentator, referring to the return of Torvill and Dean, the former Olympic Gold medalists in skating, said:

" They say that they are skating better than ever but then how do they improve on perfection?"<sup>6</sup>

This usage of the word strictly speaking is an accommodation but it is quite legitimate. Of course, Wesley and Fletcher could not be said to have used

<sup>5</sup> Passmore, J., *The Perfectibility of Man*, [London: Duckworth, 1970], pp. 11-27.

<sup>6</sup> Bonnet, R., Report on the World at One, 1994, marking the return of Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean to Olympic competition after ten years.



the word in any technical sense because this depends altogether on talent and skill.<sup>7</sup> Both men, while not oblivious to method, were more concerned about the gift of grace. However, it is often stated that they did use the word 'perfection' in its teleological sense. Harald Lindstrom maintains that Wesley's idea of perfection is 'a typical expression of the whole teleological alignment of his view of salvation'.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the Greek word *teleios*, rich and varied in its shades of meaning, is most commonly translated 'perfect'. Within the biblical context, as Delling has observed, its most characteristic meaning is that of 'totality'.<sup>9</sup> So a person who does the whole will of God has found the *raison d'être* for living and can be called *perfect*. Wesley and Fletcher certainly subscribed to this. In this approach perfection is understood not in terms of some flawless or infallible state but as a dynamic process<sup>10</sup> of growth towards the goal of becoming ever more Christlike; a goal or *telos* for which every individual was both created and redeemed. True, with the Wesleyan emphasis on the instantaneous there is the implication of a state which at the very least would appear to contradict the growth aspect. However it seems that in Wesley's understanding crisis and process could be held together by allowing growth within *perfection* as well as growth towards *perfection*. Whether or not this is possible will be considered under the heading of the problem of time. But to return to the teleological understanding of the word, it is certainly acceptable to use the word 'perfect' in this sense.

Of course, both men, while acknowledging their discomfort with the word

<sup>7</sup> Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, [London, translated Abbott T.K., 1948], Pt1, Bk.1, ch1, pp. 129 f.

<sup>8</sup> Lindstrom, H., *Wesley and Sanctification*, [Stockholm: Upsala University, 1946.], p. 126 f. [Hereafter cited as Lindstrom]

<sup>9</sup> Delling, G., *Perfect*, in G. Kittel, G. Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated by G.W. Bromiley, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976], Vol. VIII, pp. 67-78

<sup>10</sup> Outler, A. C., *Introduction in the Works of John Wesley*, (BE), Vol. 1, p. 76

'perfection',<sup>11</sup> insisted on retaining it because they believed it to be biblical. That this can be substantiated there is no doubt. As Bishop Stephen Neill, in a chapter in a work attacking what he calls the 'perfectionist error', acknowledged:

"It can hardly be doubted or denied that there are 'perfectionist elements' in the New Testament."<sup>12</sup>

Also Dr Vincent Taylor has stated:

"Beyond doubt the New Testament teaches the absolute necessity of ethical and spiritual perfection... It would, indeed, be difficult to find any important doctrinal theme which is more broadly based or more urgently presented."<sup>13</sup>

Not least of these 'perfectionist elements' is the term itself. It is used frequently in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.<sup>14</sup> But perhaps it is used nowhere more significantly than in the Sermon on the Mount where the term and the sense, in which it is usually understood,<sup>15</sup> come together. In the words of Jesus, which with some justification have been described as 'the great charter for the Christian ideal',<sup>16</sup> the call to *perfection* appears to be indisputable:

"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."<sup>17</sup>

There can be little doubt that of all the biblical evidence which might be called on to support *Christian Perfection* this text must be the most

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<sup>11</sup> Wesley writing of *Christian Perfection* stated: 'I have no particular fondness for the term. It seldom occurs either in my preaching or writings. It is my opponents who thrust it upon me continually, and ask me what I mean by it' **Letters** Vol. III, p. 167. Of course the term *perfection* was another matter for it was undeniably 'scriptural' Ibid. p.168.

<sup>12</sup> Neill, S., **Christian Holiness**, [London: Lutterworth, 1960], p. 25

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, V., **Forgiveness and Reconciliation**, [London: Macmillan, 1946] p. 189 f.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: Deuteronomy 32: 4; 2 Samuel 22:31,33; Psalm 18: 30,32; 119: 96; Ezekiel 27: 4,11; 28: 12; Matthew 5: 48; 19: 21; 1 Corinthians 2: 6; 13: 10; 2 Corinthians 13: 9,11; Ephesians 4: 13; Colossians 1: 28

<sup>15</sup> The sense of ethical and spiritual completeness of Christian character.

<sup>16</sup> Platt, F., *Perfection*, in Hastings, J., (ed) **Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics**, [Edinburgh: T.&T. Clarke, 1917], Vol. 9, p. 728

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 5:48.

significant. Jaroslav Pelikan, commenting on the historical development of Evangelical Perfection, observes, 'the imperative of perfection seemed unambiguous in the Sermon on the Mount'.<sup>18</sup> But the question is: is it as unambiguous as it first appears?

Are the words, 'You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect', a 'counsel of perfection' to be taken in the most literal sense: be perfect like God ? If so, to whom would Jesus have given such a seemingly impossible task? It could be argued that he gave it to his ordinary followers as an ideal which would always inspire them to do better. Certainly Wesley and Fletcher in stressing the importance of 'going on to Perfection' were holding before the people such an ideal. Indeed, Wesley was quite convinced that failure to do so always resulted in a lack of growth in the Church. However, it could also be argued that these words might have the reverse effect and drive people to despair; something, it would seem safe to assume, which would be much more likely. Of course, it could be countered that despair can have a positive effect, forcing the followers of Jesus to come to an end of themselves and even resulting in the discovery of a new power to fulfil the command. But this seems very strange indeed. Another way of approaching the saying might be to see it as applicable only to a certain group. This certainly is a valid way of looking at the sayings of Jesus. But it would seem fair to state that the demand is no more amenable to a special group than to the rank and file believers. Alternatively, it could be argued that Jesus never made the demand. Rather Matthew, or some austere community, invented the saying, putting it into the mouth of Jesus to give it authority. Perhaps at this point it is relevant to consider whether or not Jesus could have said it. Certainly it is possible to find an Old

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<sup>18</sup> Pelikan, J., *The Christian Tradition: A history of the Development of doctrine*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989] Vol. 5, p. 147

Testament foundation for the saying. Commentators point to its probable basis<sup>19</sup> in Leviticus:

"For I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be ye holy, for I am holy...For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."<sup>20</sup>

"Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy."<sup>21</sup>

Of course, if this is indeed the basis of Jesus' words, then as Matthew has it, the challenge has been deepened because the call is not simply to holiness but to perfection.<sup>22</sup> Assuming that the saying could have been spoken by Jesus, how is it to be understood? Clearly, Jesus had a particular group in mind. He makes the distinction between those to whom he is speaking ('you' is emphatic) and some other group or groups. Placing the Matthew version alongside the Lucan<sup>23</sup> version it would appear that Jesus' intended audience was his own followers. If this is correct, it would appear that Jesus did not consider this call to his followers to imitate God an impossibility. But, of course, the call might have been given as an ideal which although clearly unattainable, nevertheless would result, if continually aimed at, in spiritual growth. There is something very disturbing about such an approach for once the impossibility of the ideal is realised its growth potential must work in reverse. However, it is possible to find another solution to the problem. The call to imitate God need not be seen purely in terms of absolute moral perfection in order to be true to the word *perfection*. It can be seen as a call to imitate the ways of God rather than to

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also Deuteronomy 18:13, "You shall be blameless before the Lord your God."

<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 11: 44 f.

<sup>21</sup> Leviticus 19: 2.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley believed the terms meant the same. He replied to William Dodd, 'But I still think that perfection is only another term for holiness, or the image of God in man. God *made man perfect*, I think, is just the same as He made him *holy* or in His *own image*' *Letters* Vol. III, p. 168.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 6: 36.



imitate God in 'the perfection of his being'.<sup>24</sup> So to love one's enemies is to do what God does. This is still a heavy demand but nonetheless implies a *perfection* which is relative rather than absolute. Such relative *perfection* appears to be confirmed when, in the same context, Jesus instructs his followers always to pray for forgiveness.<sup>25</sup> It seems reasonable to deduce that had Jesus intended absolute *perfection* such instruction would have been meaningless. A similar point could be made in relation to the continuous 'hunger and thirst after righteousness' which Jesus said would be characteristic of his followers.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps a further clue to interpreting the word perfection is found in the story of the rich young man.<sup>27</sup> Here, it could be argued that what the young man lacked was the perfection of a wholehearted discipleship. To imitate the ways of God demanded a wholehearted commitment to understanding and doing his will. God, after all, was the 'heavenly Father' and as the force of the word Father indicates 'the children are expected to show the character of their father'.<sup>28</sup> A parallel with the community at Qumran might be drawn for they also referred to their way of life as totally devoted to God's laws.<sup>29</sup> However, the contrast is just as sharp, for as Davies has pointed out, Jesus' followers, unlike the sect at Qumran, were called not to an exclusive love but rather to an inclusive love.<sup>30</sup> Jesus expected his followers to show an 'undifferentiating observance of the commandment of love towards friend and foe'<sup>31</sup> thus

<sup>24</sup> Hill, D., *The Gospel of Matthew, New Century Bible Commentary*, [London: Marshall, Morgan, Scott, 1984 reprint], p. 131. see also, Rigaux, B., *New Testament Studies*, iv, 1958, pp 237-262

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 6:12.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 5:6.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 19:16-22.

<sup>28</sup> Marshall, I.H., *The Gospel of Luke, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, [Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978], p. 265

<sup>29</sup> *Dead Sea Scrolls, Rule of the Community*, (Manual of Discipline), 1 Q. S. 8:13.

<sup>30</sup> Davies, W.D., *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, [Cambridge: University Press, 1964], pp. 140 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Bornkamm, G., Barth, G., Held, H.J., *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, [London, 1963], p. 80

imitating their heavenly Father's ways. Perfection then could be seen in terms of being perfect in love.<sup>32</sup> If this is a correct interpretation of what Matthew has Jesus to say then it certainly has resonance with Wesley. Whatever else may or may not have been included by the term *Christian Perfection*, one of the aspects with which Wesley most consistently associated it was love. 'Pure love reigning alone in the heart and life,— this is the whole of scriptural perfection' was how he saw it.<sup>33</sup> In the words of one of Charles Wesley's many references to the experience:

"Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;  
Come quickly from above,  
Write thy new name upon my heart,  
Thy new, best name of love."<sup>34</sup>

Although this hymn sees love as personified in Christ, calling the believer to imitate him, it is true that love can be a somewhat nebulous term. Wesley however clearly defined it as:

"The loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and the loving our neighbour, every man, as ourselves, as our own souls."<sup>35</sup>

Here love was no mere emotion but an attitude towards God and humanity which should result in radical living.

*Christian Perfection* then was not to be seen as *perfectionism* but as something dynamic defining it for example in terms of love. However, this being said, had Wesley and Fletcher decided to drop the word 'perfection' it

<sup>32</sup> Delling, G., *Perfect*, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. VIII, pp. 67-78, especially 74

<sup>33</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 401. Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, Wesley, believed presented 'the true picture of Christian Perfection' He advised meditation on it. *Letters*, Vol. VII, p. 120. This Corinthians passage is also referred in the correspondence from Jane Cooper, included by Wesley in the *Plain Account*. see *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 411.

<sup>34</sup> Hymn: *O for a heart to praise my God* *Hymns and Psalms* 536 v. 5

<sup>35</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 416. At the first Methodist Conference (1744) when the doctrine was discussed the response given to the question, 'What is implied in being a perfect Christian?' was: 'The loving the Lord our God with all our heart, and mind, and soul. (Deuteronomy vi. 5.)' *Ibid.*, p. 387

is worth considering whether or not a lot of the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the concept of *Christian Perfection* would have disappeared. For while allowing for the fact that 'perfection' can have more than one legitimate usage, in relation to Christianity, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that anything short of moral perfection is intended. This difficulty is not necessarily removed though Wesley interprets *perfection* in terms of love. To be filled with perfect love can be seen as excluding sin from the life.<sup>36</sup> This seems to be an appropriate point to look at the issue of sinlessness.

## Sin

Professor Moltmann rightly makes the observation that 'sinless perfection is often used in books and essays about Wesley but he himself rejected the term.'<sup>37</sup> Certainly, Wesley himself, in the *Plain Account*, claimed to never use the term because of the danger of being self-contradictory.<sup>38</sup> However it is easy to see how both Wesley and Fletcher, then and since, could nevertheless have been understood to hold out the possibility of 'sinless perfection' to believers. For despite the many qualifications with regard to *perfection* they do show a certain ambivalence towards the phrase 'sinless perfection'. Fletcher had referred to *Christian Perfection* as 'the doctrine of an evangelically-sinless perfection'.<sup>39</sup> Qualified, it is true, but still sinless. Wesley, on the other hand, immediately following the *Plain Account*, in *Brief*

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<sup>36</sup> Wesley wrote to a Walter Churchey, '...*Christian Perfection*, is neither more nor less than pure love— love expelling sin and governing both the heart and the life of a child of God' *Letters*, Vol. V, p. 223. Again in a letter to Thomas Maxfield, someone eventually removed from Methodism because of his extreme views on Perfection, he stated: 'I like your doctrine of Perfection, or pure love; love excluding sin...' Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 192

<sup>37</sup> Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A universal affirmation*, p. 165

<sup>38</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 396

<sup>39</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 109

*Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, stated, 'I do not contend for the term sinless, though I do not object against it'.<sup>40</sup> Again, in the *Plain Account*, to the question, 'Is it sinless?' he replied, 'It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is salvation from sin.'<sup>41</sup> Salvation from sin could easily be seen as sinless. If such statements are set alongside assertions like 'a Christian can be so far perfect as not to commit sin' or 'Christians are saved in this world from all sin' then it is hardly surprising that foe or friend might draw the conclusion that *Christian Perfection* was and is nothing less than 'sinless perfection'. This point has been well made by someone as sympathetic to Wesley as W.E. Sangster when he stated that:

"...anyone who has collected all his references on the point in sermons, Journals, letters and pamphlets would have to say that on Wesley's definitions of sin and perfection he is fully committed to the phrase 'sinless perfection.'<sup>42</sup>

However, in this statement Sangster puts his finger on something which has long been recognised, that is, that the possibility or otherwise of 'sinless perfection' must depend on one's definition of 'sin'. As Rack comments:

"...Wesley was only able to assert his paradoxical doctrine of a perfection which was not perfect because he operated with two definitions of perfection, one attainable in this life and the other not; and this in turn depended on two definitions of sin..."<sup>43</sup>

What are these definitions? Colin Williams has identified one as lack of 'absolute conformity to the perfect will of God' and the other as 'conscious separation from God'.<sup>44</sup> On the one hand Wesley recognised that sin in absolute terms must be measured by the 'perfect law' of God. Fletcher also accepted this fact.<sup>45</sup> In this respect, the believer could never claim to be free

<sup>40</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 446. see also *Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 187

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442

<sup>42</sup> Sangster, W.E., *The Path to Perfection*, p. 81

<sup>43</sup> Rack, H.D., *Reasonable Enthusiast*, [London: Epworth, 1989], p. 399

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, p. 170

<sup>45</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 416., 439 f.



from sin. On the other hand sin could be defined as a 'voluntary transgression of a known law'.<sup>46</sup> Freedom from sin, in this case, was to be understood in terms of not being conscious of participating, either outwardly or inwardly, in anything contrary to love of God and neighbour. To use Fletcher's description this was what was meant by 'evangelically-sinless perfection'. *Perfection*, then, in terms of the first definition of sin, was absolute and objective but, according to the second, was relative and subjective.<sup>47</sup> To some, the latter definition, at least, makes the idea of *Christian Perfection* in this life 'intelligible',<sup>48</sup> if not any more acceptable. Many would argue that it is unacceptable to reduce the nature of sin to nothing more than a conscious willing of wrong doing. Such an analysis of sin, it is maintained, is totally inadequate and indeed dangerous.<sup>49</sup> It is inadequate because it has apparently failed to recognise that 'man is radically evil, that sin is of the very texture of human nature'.<sup>50</sup> To make a distinction, therefore, between conscious and unconscious sin is false. In post-Freudian days it must be accepted that the worst sins are often those of which a person is least aware.<sup>51</sup> By identifying sin only as conscious sin, *perfection*, then, comes to be seen purely in terms of the absence of conscious sin, thus exposing the believer to the danger of ignoring sin's radical nature. Such disregard, far from helping the believer on the pathway of *perfection*, might, on the contrary, do nothing more than encourage him or her in a 'pharisaic self appraisal',<sup>52</sup> which leads only on the pathway of self-delusion. Understandably, then, Newton Flew, a Methodist scholar in

<sup>46</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 396

<sup>47</sup> Lindstrom, p. 154

<sup>48</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 399

<sup>49</sup> Greeves, F., *The Meaning of Sin*, [London: Epworth, 1956], p.168

<sup>50</sup> Davies, D.R., *On to Orthodoxy*, [London: Hodder Stoughton, 1939] p. 207

<sup>51</sup> Flew, R.N., *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, [London: Oxford University Press, 1934], p. 333

<sup>52</sup> Greeves, p. 168

the early part of this century, when considering the defects in Wesley's doctrine of *perfection*, concluded:

"The stress on the consciousness and deliberate intention of the agent is the most formidable defect in Wesley's definition of the ideal."<sup>53</sup>

Yet the definition of sin, as a voluntary transgression of a known law of God with its emphasis that only conscious sin is sin, was only part of Wesley's whole account of sin. To attack *Christian Perfection* simply on the alleged inadequacy of this definition really fails to understand the doctrine as Wesley and Fletcher presented it.<sup>54</sup> It is true Flew acknowledged that voluntary transgression was not the whole picture of sin.<sup>55</sup> He pointed out that in the 'less formal and more intimate teaching' of the hymns of the Wesleys there was indeed a hint of 'the subtlety, ingenuity, hiddenness of moral evil' which a proper understanding of sin required.<sup>56</sup> But it surely must be argued that there was something more than a 'hint'. Outside of the hymns, references to sin can be found in Wesley, which are as radical and thoroughgoing as any in their understanding of sin.<sup>57</sup> Wesley clearly did not abandon the idea of total depravity,<sup>58</sup> nor did he ignore the inwardness of sin. Indeed as Rupert Davies has suggested, with Wesley's attention to the sins of the spirit, whatever his lack of psychological know-how, it is possible to identify some of those unconscious drives of human nature which

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<sup>53</sup> Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, p. 333

<sup>54</sup> Collins, K., *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology*, [Wilmore, Kentucky: Wesley Heritage Press 1993], p.167 n.1, review by George, A.R., in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, Vol. 50, February 1995, p. 24 f.

<sup>55</sup> Frederic Greeves detects a loss of nerve on Flew's part. Flew, having bitten the bullet as a Methodist in criticising Wesley's narrow definition of sin, is seen by Greeves, to go on to leave the problem of the possibility of salvation for the unconscious unresolved. see Greeves, p.53

<sup>56</sup> Flew, p. 334

<sup>57</sup> see, for example, Wesley's classic sermons: *On Sin in Believers* and *The Repentance of Believers* **Wesley's Works**, (BE) Vol. I, pp. 314-352

<sup>58</sup> see Lindstrom, p. 52 also Dorr, D., *Total Corruption and the Wesleyan Tradition*, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, Vol. XXXI, 1964, pp. 303-321

contemporary opinion is still learning to diagnose.<sup>59</sup> Fletcher too, confirmed the radical approach to sin when, for example, he argued that *Christian Perfection* in claiming the removal of indwelling sin did not assert the total erasure of the 'infection of nature'.<sup>60</sup> This was not dissimilar to Wesley's description of the believer continuing to live in a 'shattered corruptible body'.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, Wesley and Fletcher by insisting on the possibility of the removal of that which they called 'indwelling sin' left themselves open, at the very least, to the charge of ambiguity. By accepting the possibility of sin's removal, it would seem that sin becomes a thing of substance. It might be viewed almost like a 'rotten tooth' which could be extracted by God, the 'celestial dentist'.<sup>62</sup> Yet, if the radical nature of sin is to be maintained this, it would appear, is a contradiction. It must surely be impossible to hold to a doctrine of total depravity, with its emphasis on the all pervasive nature of sin, while at the same time holding out the offer of the removal of sin. Albert Outler has referred to this as the

"unstable tension between the claims that a Christian may be delivered from sin's bondage, and that 'sin remains but no longer reigns.'"<sup>63</sup>

It can be argued that Wesley and Fletcher were able to accept such a tension because they set the doctrine of total depravity in the 'context of

<sup>59</sup> *H.M.C.G.B.*, Vol. I, p.173

<sup>60</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 439 f; Chapter 3, *Christian Perfection*: Fletcher's elaboration, pp. 55 f.

<sup>61</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 419, 383. see also pp. 374, 417, 442

<sup>62</sup> Turner, J.M., *Conflict and Reconciliation*, [London: Epworth, 1985], p. 51. It was E.H. Sugden in his edition of the *Standard Sermons of John Wesley*, [London, 1921, 2 Vols.] who first noted that Wesley had never quite shaken off the erroneous idea that sin is a thing which has to be taken out of a man, like a cancer or a rotten tooth'. Vol. 2, 459; 148 f. Against this however it can be argued that Wesley did not say sin was absent but rather that the Christian knew power over it. see: Knight, J.A., *John William Fletcher and the Early Methodist Tradition*, Vanderbilt University Ph.D. thesis, 1966, p. 158

<sup>63</sup> Outler, A., Introductory Comment to Sermons 13 and 14, *On Sin in Believers* and *The Repentance of Believers*, *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. 1, p. 315

total grace, of the great salvation'.<sup>64</sup> This they did because primarily they believed it to be scriptural.

Both Wesley and Fletcher saw the First Epistle of John as providing one of the surest grounds in the scriptures for such teaching.<sup>65</sup> There, against the background of God's grace, expressed in Christ's sacrificial death and continuing ministry of intercession, the call was given to walk in the daily reality of freedom from sin.<sup>66</sup> But was this to be understood in terms of walking in some sort of post-conversion sinlessness? Certainly some of John's statements might be interpreted to say just that very thing. The key passage is 1 John 3: 4-10. It is Raymond Brown who observes:

"That the Johannine tradition lends itself to a thesis of sinlessness after becoming a believer is illustrated graphically by the fact, that while the author of the First Epistle rejects the claim of the opponents, 'We have not sinned',<sup>67</sup> he comes fairly close to making the same claim himself precisely in the imitation of the sinlessness of Christ...<sup>68</sup> In another text he associates the challenge to sinlessness with being begotten by God...<sup>69</sup> "70

Certainly this identifies the problem. But unless John is to be rejected as totally inconsistent, he himself did not regard these statements as in any

<sup>64</sup> Rupp, G., *Principalities and Powers*, [London: Epworth, 1952], p. 80

<sup>65</sup> Of the thirty texts Sangster identifies as basic to Wesley's thought on *Christian Perfection* ten come from 1 John. see Sangster, *Path to Perfection*, pp. 37-52. see also Slater, G., *Ministerial Training: William Burt Pope (1822-1903)*, *Epworth Review*, Vol. 15, May 1988, p. 63. Fletcher devotes ten pages to a discussion on John as a defender of the doctrine of *Christian Perfection*. see *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, pp. 40-50. Donald Dayton suggests that between Fletcher and Wesley there may be an exegetical shift. Wesley holding to a basically 'Pauline or Johannine orientation' with Fletcher moving to a 'Lucan one' see Dayton, D.W., p. 52 f. While there is merit in such a suggestion it need not be interpreted to mean a shift in theological emphasis. After all it could be argued that the theological truth which Paul proclaimed on the basis of his christology was the same theological truth which Luke presented on the basis of his pneumatology. see Dempster, M. W., *The Church's Moral Witness: A study of Glossolalia in Luke's Theology of the Acts*, *Paraclete*, 23, 1989, pp. 1-7. However John is crucial to Fletcher's understanding of *Christian Perfection*. Indeed he claimed that it would have been no more ridiculous to present Satan as a friend of holiness than to say John was an enemy of *Christian Perfection*. see this thesis Chapter 2, pp. 49-51

<sup>66</sup> 1 John 2: 1-2

<sup>67</sup> 1 John 1:10.

<sup>68</sup> 1 John 3: 5-6

<sup>69</sup> 1 John 3: 9.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, R.E., *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, [New York: Paulist Press, 1979], p. 126



way incompatible with those which, elsewhere in the Epistle, had implied that believers did sin.<sup>71</sup> Various interpretations have been offered as to how such a reconciliation might be achieved. Often commentators point to the present continuous form of the verb in verse 9 and argue that John means the Christian will not habitually sin.<sup>72</sup> So, for example, the *New International Version* translates the verse as:

“No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.”<sup>73</sup>

This does seem to be a common-sense way of reconciling the apparent inconsistencies and certainly can be seen to be in keeping with general New Testament teaching. It is not, however, without its difficulties. Certainly Wesley would not have accepted it. He attacked such qualifications as ‘doeth not commit sin habitually’ or ‘not as other man do’ or ‘not as he did before’ as entirely unwarranted from the text.<sup>74</sup> Though it has to be said that he too, added his own qualifications when ‘cannot’ was restricted to voluntary.<sup>75</sup> As Charles Dodd, among others, has pointed out, the necessity to stress the present continuous tense of the verb means an important point of interpretation rests upon the questionable foundation of a ‘grammatical

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<sup>71</sup> 1 John 1: 8, 10; 2: 1; 5: 16

<sup>72</sup> see for example; Westcott, B.F., *The Johannine Epistles*, [London: Macmillan, 1883, Reprinted, Nashville: Abingdon, 1966], p. 104., Humphries, A.L., *1 John*, in Peake, A.S., (ed) *A Commentary on the Bible*, [London: T.C.&E.C. Jack, 1920], p. 918., Morris, L., *1 John*, in Guthrie, D., Motyer, J.A., (eds) *New Bible Commentary Revised*, [London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970], p. 1265

<sup>73</sup> 1 John 3: 9, *New International Version*, [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986]

<sup>74</sup> Wesley's Sermon on, *Christian Perfection*, in *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. II, p. 107. see also Sermon on, *The Marks of New Birth*, in *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. I, p. 420 f.

<sup>75</sup> see below p.161 f. This of course reflects the ‘unstable tension’, to which Professor Outler refers, between the claims that a Christian may be delivered from sin's bondage and that sin remains but does not reign. This tension remains. See for example *Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 154 f., Vol. V, pp. 252, 322. However it would seem fair to note that Wesley was making some of these statements within the context of controversy and just as with John some of the statements can appear to be contradictory.

subtlety'.<sup>76</sup> Howard Marshall observes that translators do not do this elsewhere in the New Testament.<sup>77</sup> Another way of coming to terms with the passage is to see it as John setting out the ideal character of the Christian. This would not mean, as his opponents might have suggested, that the Christian would be sinless.<sup>78</sup> Rather it would mean that the Christian having been born of God had the 'obligation' to make it his or her goal to live without sin.<sup>79</sup> Sin, therefore, while not impossible for the child of God was 'abnormal' and 'unnatural'.<sup>80</sup> A variation on this approach is to interpret verse 9 in the light of verse 6 where sinlessness is linked to being in Christ. Rudolph Bultmann suggests the radical nature of new birth does indeed give the Christian the possibility of sinlessness but only as he or she abides in Christ.<sup>81</sup> This interpretation has indeed an honourable past.<sup>82</sup> Certainly Wesley would have endorsed such an understanding for the concept is clear in the *Plain Account*. Fletcher too, can be seen to hold to the concept. More specifically Wesley commented on verse 6 in his *Notes on the New Testament*, as follows:

"Whosoever abideth in communion with him, by loving faith, sinneth not - While he so abideth. Whosoever sinneth certainly seeth him not - The loving eye of his soul is not then fixed upon God; neither doth he then experimentally know him - whatever he did in time past."<sup>83</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Dodd, C.H., *The Johannine Epistles, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary*, [London: Hodder Stoughton, 1946] quoted in Marshall, I. H., *The Epistles of John, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978, Reprinted 1990], p. 180; see also Kubo, S., *1 John 3,9: Absolute or Habitual?*, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 7, 1969, pp. 47-56, summarised in *New Testament Abstracts* 14, 1969, p. 290

<sup>77</sup> Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 180

<sup>78</sup> 'We have not sinned' 1 John 1: 10

<sup>79</sup> Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 126

<sup>80</sup> Dodd, p.

<sup>81</sup> Bultmann, R., *The Johannine Epistles*, [Philadelphia: Hermeneia, 1973], pp. 51-53.

<sup>82</sup> Alford quotes Bede: 'in so far as he abides in him, he does not sin'. see Alford, H., *The Greek New Testament*, [London, 1862], Vol. IV, p. 465. Stott refers to Augustine taking the same approach. see Stott, J.R.W., *Epistles of John*, [London: Tyndale, 1964, Reprinted 1971], p. 133

<sup>83</sup> *Notes*, p. 385

So as one contemporary commentator observes, 'Fellowship with the sinless One and indulgence in sin are a contradiction in terms'.<sup>84</sup> However, this approach is not without difficulty for while the words, in verse 6, 'No one who abides in him sins', may be understood conditionally, the words, 'he cannot sin', in verse 9, unequivocally appear to be nothing other than absolute. Yet it is clear from Wesley's sermon, *The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God*, where the text is 1 John 3: 9, that he interprets verse 9 in the light of verse 6. He stated:

"But 'whosoever is born of God', while he abideth in faith and love and in the spirit of prayer and thanksgiving, not only doth not, but 'cannot' thus 'commit sin'. So long as he thus believeth in God through Christ and loves him and is pouring out his heart before him, he cannot voluntarily transgress any command of God..."<sup>85</sup>

Of course, there is a way of dealing with this difficulty. Charles Dodd noted the polemical background against which John wrote and suggested that, in contrast to Chapter 1, where the issue was perfection, here in Chapter 3 the issue is moral complacency<sup>86</sup> therefore the strong language of John may be seen as a 'pardonable exaggeration'.<sup>87</sup> However, if this is unacceptable, it might be possible to reconcile the difficulty of John's absolute in verse 9 by defining the 'cannot sin' in terms of wilful and deliberate sin. John Ebrard was one such commentator who attempted to reconcile the difficulty by distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary sin.<sup>88</sup> True, Wesley himself made such a distinction. Also in the sermon, *The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God*,<sup>89</sup> he qualified John's 'cannot sin' by apparently

<sup>84</sup> Bruce, F.F., *The Epistles of John*, [London: Pickering & Inglis, Reprinted paperback edition 1983], p. 90

<sup>85</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. 1, p. 436

<sup>86</sup> Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, pp 78-81

<sup>87</sup> Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 181

<sup>88</sup> Ebrard, J.H.A., *Commentary on John's Epistles*, [Edinburgh: T.&T. Clarke, 1860]

<sup>89</sup> See above, page 159 footnote 82.

limiting it to voluntary sin.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps the greatest difficulty here is whether or not John assumed such a limited definition of sin. He did refer to sin as 'lawlessness' but what did he mean?<sup>91</sup> Commentators do differ. There is, for example, no doubt in the mind of someone like John Stott who stated quite categorically that John 'draws no distinction between voluntary and involuntary, knowing and unknowing, lawlessness', all sin was a breach of the laws of God.<sup>92</sup> Kenneth Grayston, on the other hand, saw two different, though possibly, complementary, views of sin in the passage 1 John 3: 4-10. In verses 4-7, John used the word 'lawlessness' to present sin as 'a wrong act wilfully done',<sup>93</sup> whereas in verses 8-10 he went on to add to this 'simple' though 'superficial' view the more comprehensive view of sin which covered those sins 'seemingly neither willed nor intended'.<sup>94</sup> Of course, it might be argued that even if John did intend to include such a definition of sin, there is still a difficulty in that it assumes a Christian can never deliberately sin. Experience as well as scripture would seem to exclude such an assumption. How then is John to be understood?

It must be obvious even in this rather cursory look at some of the attempts which have been made to understand John's teaching that there is no easy solution. It also highlights the tension with which Wesley and Fletcher struggled in their attempt to present a 'sinlessness' which was not 'sinless perfection'. As F.F. Bruce has observed:

"John's antitheses are clear-cut. While they are to be understood in the context of his letter and of the situation which it presupposes, any attempt to weaken them out of regard for

<sup>90</sup> He states: "By sin I here understand outward sin, according to the plain, common acceptation of the word: an actual, voluntary 'transgression of the law'; of the revealed, written law of God; of any commandment of God acknowledged to be such at the time that it is transgressed." *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 1, p. 436

<sup>91</sup> 1 John 3: 4.

<sup>92</sup> Stott, *Epistles of John*, p. 135

<sup>93</sup> Grayston, K., *The Johannine Epistles, The New Century Bible Commentary*, [London: Marshall, Morgan, Scott, 1984], p. 104

<sup>94</sup> Grayston, p. 105.



human infirmity, or to make them less sharp and uncompromising than they are, is to misinterpret them. True interpretation must allow an author to mean what he says, even if that meaning is uncongenial to the interpreter."<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps Marshall, in his conclusions on the passage, came near to a solution.<sup>96</sup> Picking up a point made by others that behind John's teaching there were eschatological expectations, he noted that Jewish literature characterised the Age to Come as an age of perfection. Those who would be privileged to enter it would be free from sin. So he quoted, for example, the *Book of Enoch* which stated:

"And there shall be bestowed upon the elect wisdom. And they shall live and never again sin."<sup>97</sup>

Such an expectation was, no doubt, encouraged by promises already existing in the Old Testament.<sup>98</sup> Against this background and in the light of the New Testament teaching in general, it would hardly be surprising if the early Christians had deduced that the age of fulfilment, with its possibility of sinlessness, had arrived. Professor Marshall, therefore, concluded that John was describing:

"the eschatological reality, the possibility that is open to believers, which is both a fact('he cannot sin') and conditional ('[if he] lives in him). It is a reality which is continually threatened by the tensions of living in a sinful world, and yet one which is capable of being realised by faith."<sup>99</sup>

In the light of the definitions, therefore, it would appear that what was on offer to the Christian was not an experience or state of sinlessness but rather the possibility of the power of God to enable him or her not to sin. Here there is a difference, albeit a subtle one, from the idea that John was simply referring to freedom from habitual sin. New birth involved a radical

<sup>95</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 92

<sup>96</sup> Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, pp.181-184

<sup>97</sup> 1 Enoch 5: 8 f.

<sup>98</sup> Ezekiel 36: 27., Jeremiah 31: 33 f.

<sup>99</sup> Marshall, p.182

change in human nature in which sin was completely unnatural.<sup>100</sup> While this did not mean that sin was impossible for the Christian, it did suggest that he or she need not sin. If such interpretation is indeed possible, it certainly throws an important light on how Wesley and Fletcher could have understood *Christian Perfection*. Furthermore the difficulties of coming to terms with John's teaching which have been outlined do have a certain resonance with the struggles of Wesley and Fletcher.

### **A Problem with time**

Here the problem is focused on Wesley and Fletcher's insistence that the experience of *Christian Perfection* can be both 'instantaneous' and 'gradual'. On the surface at least this would seem to be nothing other than an 'illicit union of two incompatible ideas'.<sup>101</sup> If *Christian Perfection* is indeed to be experienced in an instant any suggestion that it can also be known gradually surely implies works which must cancel out the instantaneous way of faith. On the other hand, it might be argued that any such suggestion of incompatibility is ill founded. The question 'Is it gradual or instantaneous?' is really an invalid disjunction.<sup>102</sup> The conflict is 'largely about words'.<sup>103</sup>

Certainly it is true that in Wesley's own statements there is quite clearly a tension, not to say a contradiction.<sup>104</sup> Prior to 1738 it could be argued that Wesley saw holiness exclusively in terms of a gradual work. In 1733 for example, he wrote that:

“(No one) should ever dream of shaking off his old opinions, passions, tempers, of being ‘sanctified throughout in spirit, soul,

<sup>100</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 92.

<sup>101</sup> Staples, R.L., *John Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection: A reinterpretation*, Pacific School of Religion Th.D. thesis, 1963 p. 129

<sup>102</sup> Peters, p. 51.

<sup>103</sup> *H.M.C.G.B.*, Vol 1, p. 172.

<sup>104</sup> Peters, pp. 47- 51.

and body', without a constant and continued course of general self-denial."<sup>105</sup>

However, after his Aldersgate experience the idea of the 'instantaneous' was introduced.<sup>106</sup> This should not be understood as an immediate 'espousal of the instantaneous character of sanctification',<sup>107</sup> but it does seem to represent a new element in Wesley's thinking. Over the next twenty years, at least, the two elements appeared to exist together in an uneasy tension. Sometimes the instantaneous was emphasised, while at other times the gradual was highlighted. With the perfectionist revivals<sup>108</sup> of the 1760s and the growth of 'living witnesses' who professed the experience of *Christian Perfection* as a gift, it is possible to detect a change in Wesley. There was a greater willingness in accepting the experience of *Christian Perfection* as a gift available 'now' in response to faith. It was for all and not just to be known at, or a little before, the point of death. Consequently, the emphasis on the instantaneous became an insistent feature of Wesley's presentation of *Christian Perfection* for the remainder of his life.<sup>109</sup> Of course, it would be wrong to conclude from this that Wesley had now subsumed the gradual into the 'instantaneous'. The gift should, indeed, be sought 'now' but 'the means of grace and discipline'<sup>110</sup> were not redundant, either before or after the experience of *Christian Perfection*.<sup>111</sup> The process, which led to the experiential moment and also on from that moment to an ever

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<sup>105</sup> op., cited in Peters, p. 48

<sup>106</sup> Tyerman suggested that not until the 1760's did Wesley actually teach that *Christian Perfection* could be obtained as gift. Tyerman, L., *Life and Times of John Wesley*, [London, 1872], Vol. II, pp. 417, 444. It has also been suggested that the Aldersgate experience was the experience of *Christian Perfection*. See for example: Gentry P.W., *Aldersgate Still Happens*, *The Preacher's Magazine*, September-November 1979, pp. 8, 59-60

<sup>107</sup> Peters, p. 48

<sup>108</sup> Rack gives an account and analysis of these in *Reasonable Enthusiast*, chapter IX, pp. 333 - 342

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 398

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Chapter 3 *Christian Perfection: Wesley and Fletcher compared*, pp. 125 f.

deepening experience, would continue right into eternity. Fletcher was in total agreement with Wesley at this point. As has been noted therefore, they did not regard it as as 'either or' but 'both one and the other'. Yet can such a synthesis really be sustained?

Within the Methodist tradition the verdict of history would seem to suggest that such a synthesis cannot be sustained. Two distinct streams can be clearly traced since the time of Wesley.<sup>112</sup> One stream emphasised the experience of holiness more in terms of growth, seeing it as a gradual development, while the other stream stressed the sudden and definite experience, seeing it as a 'second blessing' not unlike conversion. This division, as Peters has noted, probably represents the 'watershed' in the development of the doctrine of *Christian Perfection*, dividing those who regarded *Christian Perfection* in absolute terms from those who were more accommodating in their interpretation.<sup>113</sup> To adopt the latter approach may mean that *Christian Perfection* will be seen as something rather nebulous and esoteric, resulting in its eventual disappearance leaving nothing more than a memory of a past tradition. This certainly could be said of the situation in main-stream Methodism in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland today. B. E. Beck, Secretary of the British Methodist Conference in England, wrote in the *Methodist Recorder* :

"Like so many of John's doctrines, the language of *Christian Perfection* is imprinted on our minds through his brother Charles' hymns, but it is hardly a talking point in modern Methodism... The structure of Wesley's doctrine of perfection seems to me to be damaged beyond repair. It is no wonder that modern Methodism

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<sup>112</sup> Turner, J.M., *Victorian Values - Or whatever happened to John Wesley's Scriptural Holiness?*, The Wesley Historical Society Lecture 1988, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, Vol. XLVI part 6, pp. 165-184.

<sup>113</sup> Peters, p.47.



has not retained it."<sup>114</sup>

If the desired objective of *Christian Perfection* is really holiness of life then it can be expressed in the far less controversial way of gradual growth, a way which would be acceptable to the whole of Christendom. The problem is: this was not how Wesley and Fletcher expressed it. It was true that holiness was indeed an aspiration and that the wholehearted Christian was always growing in sanctification. Wesley and Fletcher exhorted the believer to 'go on to perfection'. But holiness was more: it was also an experience. Within Methodism, Adam Clarke(1760-1832), one of Wesley's 'marshals'<sup>115</sup>, would have been a significant opinion former for the continuity of this emphasis.<sup>116</sup> This stream continued on and developed particularly in the nineteenth century Holiness Movement finding expression in such denominations as the Free Methodist Church and the Church of the Nazarene. Of course, in adopting this approach the difficulty for *Christian Perfection* now becomes its sharply focused stress on a second and necessary experience distinct from conversion seen to be exchanging the tedious way of gradual growth in grace for the fast track to 'perfect sanctification'.<sup>117</sup> So, for example, L.R.Marston, a bishop in the Free Methodist Church, commissioned by the Board of Bishops to write an official account of Free Methodism's first century, stated:

"From the event of its founding, the touchstone of the Free Methodism's doctrinal integrity has been its faithfulness to the

<sup>114</sup> Beck, B.E., 'Perfect Love?', *Methodist Recorder*, Thursday, February 21, 1991, p.20. Turner also comments that "The average English Methodist knows little of the mainstream tradition of *Christian Perfection* unless he has heard it through the 'second blessing tradition or in Charles Wesley's holiness hymns which are still sung." Turner, J.M., *Conflict and Reconciliation*, p. 52.

<sup>115</sup> *H.M.C.G.B.*, Vol. 1, p. xxxvii.

<sup>116</sup> see Clarke, A., *Discourses*, Vol. 1, [London, 2nd edition, 1834] Sermons VI;X;XI;XIII.

<sup>117</sup> See Dieter, M., *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century*, [Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980] ; Bebbington, D.W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730's to the 1980's*, [London: Unwin Hyman, 1989], pp.151-180.

Wesleyan witness to entire sanctification as a distinct work of grace."<sup>118</sup>

Again, in the birth place of Methodism, one of the classic expositions of this approach can be seen in the work of Thomas Cooke, a former Principal of Cliff College, who in making the distinction between New Birth and Entire Sanctification stated:

"Regeneration is holiness begun...Entire sanctification is the finishing of that work."<sup>119</sup>

Certainly there are passages in Wesley and Fletcher which might be cited in support of such a position. Yet Professor Outler has argued that it was certainly not Wesley, who saw *Christian Perfection* in terms of the 'second blessing', but rather the nineteenth century 'Methodists in America'.<sup>120</sup> Referring to a passage in the Sermon on *The Repentance of Believers* where Wesley actually used the words 'second change' Professor Outler stated:

"This may have been the ground for an implied doctrine of 'sinless perfection' which Wesley generally repudiates, and thus could be understood as the warrant for a post-Wesleyan doctrine of 'entire sanctification' as a second and separate work of grace"<sup>121</sup>

Clearly in Outler's opinion the 'second blessing' notion was post-Wesleyan. Turner lends support to this view when he noted the influence of the American tradition in the 'feed-back' process with Cliff College.<sup>122</sup> Bruner, however, felt it would be hard to accept Outler's explanation given the emphasis of Wesley on the 'subsequent instantaneous experience'.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Marston, L.R., *A Living Witness: A historical interpretation of Free Methodism's First Century*, [Winona Lake, Indiana: Light and Life Press, 1960], p. 274.

<sup>119</sup> Cooke, T., *New Testament Holiness*, [London: Epworth Press, sixteenth edition, 1963, first published 1902], pp. 27, 29.

<sup>120</sup> Outler, J., *John Wesley*, p. 31.

<sup>121</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. 1, p.346.

<sup>122</sup> Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation*, p. 52.

<sup>123</sup> Bruner, F.D., *The Theology of the Holy Spirit*, [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971], p. 43 n.19.

Bruner focused on what he called the faulty theology of 'subsequence'.<sup>124</sup> He asserted that the study of Lindstrom underscored his contention regarding the dominance of a 'theology of subsequence' in Wesley.<sup>125</sup> Such a theology is seen to present normative Christianity as a two stage experience: broadly speaking, the first stage is justification in which one receives Christ with the attendant blessings of forgiveness and reconciliation and the second stage is sanctification which is usually seen in terms of receiving the Spirit. This second stage is quite definitely presented as a subsequent work of grace. Indeed, it is quite often referred to as a 'second work of grace'. But reference to a 'second work of grace' immediately raises questions. For example, does it mean that Christ's saving work in conversion is in some way inadequate? Certainly the implication would seem to be that only with the 'second touch' will salvation really be complete. This in turn would mean that there are first and second class Christians. While those who espouse the 'second blessing' position would strongly deny any such suggestion, in practice, it is difficult to avoid such a conclusion. Undoubtedly a major difficulty for those who insist on the 'instantaneous' is the matter of scriptural support. Vincent Taylor was very certain that the scriptures offered none, he stated:

"There is no support in the New Testament teaching for the view that sanctification is a sudden and miraculous gift of the Spirit in response to importunate prayer."<sup>126</sup>

Sangster believed Wesley's response to such an assertion would have depended on the definition of the word 'sanctification'.<sup>127</sup> If by sanctification the 'impartation of the rich wholeness of holiness' was meant he would

<sup>124</sup> Bruner, *The Theology of the Holy Spirit*, p. 61-63.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 38 n.7. This must be a highly selective reading of Lindstrom for he does argue that the most prominent element in Wesley's thinking is the gradual.

<sup>126</sup> Taylor, V., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, [London: Macmillan, 1941], p. 154

<sup>127</sup> Sangster, *The Path to Perfection*, p.143

have agreed, for eternity would not be enough for such an experience. On the other hand, if by sanctification was meant freedom from conscious sin, he would have taken strong exception to Taylor's assertion! Writing more recently than Taylor, Marshall does not consider Sangster very convincing at this point, maintaining that there is no solid biblical evidence for any doctrine of 'instantaneous sanctification'. Marshall believes that the only real support for a 'second blessing' experience is to be found in contemporary testimony. While the validity of such testimony, as a 'therapeutic crisis' in the life of a backslider, should be recognised, its claim to be a second and necessary stage in the normal Christian life cannot.<sup>128</sup> Of course, while it is true to identify the 'second blessing' as Wesleyan it is a matter of debate as to whether it really belonged to Wesley and Fletcher. It would be hard to deny that both men stressed the moment of *Christian Perfection* and in so doing must be open to the charge of a two-tier salvation with its 'instantaneous sanctification'. Wesley, for instance, in the *Plain Account* could be said to be supporting a theology of subsequence when he stated:

"Neither dare we affirm, as some have done that all this salvation is given at once. There is indeed an instantaneous, as well as a gradual, work of God in his children; and there wants not, we know a cloud of witnesses, who have received, in one moment, either a clear sense of the forgiveness of their sins, or the abiding witness of the Holy Spirit. But we do not know of a single instance, in any place, of a person's receiving, in one and the same moment, remission of sins, the abiding witness of the Spirit, and a new, a clean heart."<sup>129</sup>

There are other statements which could be cited, outside of the latter document, that are in a similar vein. Fletcher can also be quoted where the grounds for the same charge are equally as strong against him. For

<sup>128</sup> Marshall, I.H., *Sanctification in Wesley and Calvin*, *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIV, 1962, p.79

<sup>129</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. X1, p. 380.



example, he stated:

"If the momentary display of Christ's bodily glory could in an instant turn Saul, the blaspheming, bloody persecutor, into Paul, the praying, gentle apostle; if a sudden sight of Christ's hands could, in a moment, root up from Thomas's heart that detestable resolution, 'I will not believe', and produce that deep confession of faith, 'My Lord and my God!' what cannot the display of Christ's spiritual glory operate in the believing soul, to which he manifests himself 'according to that power whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself' ?... why should we not upon the performance of the condition be changed in a moment from indwelling sin to indwelling holiness?"<sup>130</sup>

If such statements are truly representative, it is surely hard to escape the conclusion that the 'second blessing' theology was developed, not indeed by nineteenth century Methodists in America, as Professor Outler has argued, but by none other than Wesley and Fletcher themselves. This would probably be a fair conclusion were it not for the fact that both men insisted on keeping in the equation the 'gradual' element. They argued that *Christian Perfection*, however contradictory it might appear, was 'both preceded and followed by a gradual work' and would be always capable of improvement.<sup>131</sup> So Fletcher quoted Wesley with approval:

"...God may, with man's good leave, cut short his work, in whatever degree he pleases, and do the usual work of many years in a moment. He does so in many instances: and yet there is a gradual work both before and after the moment; so that one may affirm, the work is gradual, another, it is instantaneous, without any manner of contradiction."<sup>132</sup>

But herein lies the problem: can these two seemingly irreconcilable ideals be reconciled? Lindstrom believed that while it cannot be denied that the 'instantaneous' is part of Wesley's thinking it has been overlooked that the 'gradual' is the most prominent element. He maintained that the 'instantaneous' and the 'gradual' merge to provide an order of salvation

<sup>130</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 175 f.

<sup>131</sup> Chapter 3, *Christian Perfection: Wesley and Fletcher compared*, p. 125 f.

<sup>132</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 169

which is peculiar to Wesley. In this merging, salvation is understood to be a way by which the individual passes through a series of successive stages, with each stage marking a different and higher level.<sup>133</sup> New birth, occurring instantaneously through divine intervention, therefore, was a distinct stage. Following this, the believer normally experienced a gradual sanctification before the second distinct stage: 'entire sanctification'. This also was a work of God wrought instantaneously in the life of the believer. However, following this stage there was still a gradual growth, a growth which continued on into eternity. Considered against the background of Wesley and Fletcher's belief that the development of the spiritual life could be compared to the natural life, (i.e. in the sense of childhood, adulthood, fatherhood<sup>134</sup>), this merging of the two ideals as Lindstrom presented it, has real merit. Nevertheless while the emphasis on the dynamic may soften the stress on the instantaneous it still remains very much part of the process and therefore the difficulty has not been resolved. Salvation is still to be seen as a tiered affair. True, bringing the 'gradual' aspect of the salvation into clearer focus means that proper recognition has now been given to the dynamic nature of salvation. This is important. But *Christian Perfection* seems effectively to be a second distinct stage on the pilgrim way. Indeed, paralleled as it is with new birth, it seems to be quite definitely a second distinctive stage.<sup>135</sup> So those who have experienced *Christian Perfection* will have, as at new birth, the assurance of having reached this second stage. Such assurance must add emphasis to a second stage. Furthermore, with *Christian Perfection* apparently offering a complete victory over sin in contrast to the previous partial victory, it can be nothing other than a

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<sup>133</sup> Lindstrom, p. 105

<sup>134</sup> *Letters*, Vol. VI, p. 146. See also *Notes* 1 Corinthians 2:6; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 4:12; 1 John 2:12-14.

<sup>135</sup> Lindstrom, p. 140.

distinctive higher stage. Of course it is true, as Lindstrom observed, Wesley did not believe there was any difference in kind between 'sanctification' and 'perfect sanctification'. The difference was simply one of degree. Still it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that in Wesley and Fletcher's scheme of things salvation is not complete without this crisis.

Leaving aside for the moment whether or not there is an instantaneous experience for the Christian which can bring complete victory over sin, the matter of assurance, which is related to the instantaneous nature of the experience, further complicates the issue. Both men encouraged the believer to expect and claim, albeit humbly, the gift of *Christian Perfection*. They believed that those who had experienced this gift could, like those who had been justified, know of their state. Yet to claim such knowledge created real difficulties. As Flew commented:

"A man may bear testimony to his awareness of a God who is willing and able to 'destroy the last remains of sin'. He cannot know himself well enough to claim that God has already done it. He can be aware that he is in the hands of One whose presence floods his heart with supernatural love. But he cannot without pride believe that he is now no longer on a permanently lower level, but on a permanently higher level. The first kind of assurance is a conviction about God. The second kind of assurance is a conviction about himself."<sup>136</sup>

Here Flew put his finger on what has been recognised as a major problem for the concept of *Christian Perfection*, the claim of being conscious of having freedom from sin. From a scriptural viewpoint the obvious difficulty is the lack of hard evidence to support the notion of sanctification as an instantaneous gift of the Spirit which is given in response to importunate prayer. True, Wesley sought to distinguish between the witness of the Spirit to *Christian Perfection* and the witness of the Spirit to justification, new Birth and adoption. But while it can be clearly proved from the scriptures that the

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<sup>136</sup> Flew, *The Idea of Perfection*, p. 337.

Spirit witnesses to the reality of the believer's relationship with God, it is very doubtful that the same can be done with regard to his or her sanctity. The scriptures which Wesley used for support of the witness of the Spirit to *Christian Perfection* were in the main concerned with a person knowing that he or she is a child of God. Rattenbury observed that Wesley's teaching at this point was not the result of scriptural analysis but rather the result of an 'analogical deduction' drawn from the experience of a consciousness of forgiveness.<sup>137</sup> Sangster made a similar point when he stated:

"Wesley carried over without any apparent sense of crossing a gulf, the conviction that we would be assured that our sins were forgiven and affirmed that we would be assured of our sanctification as well."<sup>138</sup>

But the scriptures will not support such a deduction. Something which makes this matter even more confusing is the fact that Wesley himself appears never to have claimed the experience. Although there have been attempts to identify such a testimony the mystery remains.<sup>139</sup> No doubt it would seem very strange indeed if Wesley had not in some measure experienced what he had preached and so ardently pressed on others. Flew wondered whether Wesley might have had some 'half-conscious suspicion that avowal' might have been 'perilous to the health of his own soul'.<sup>140</sup> If this were the case, it raises questions about his pastoral method!

<sup>137</sup> Rattenbury, J.E., *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*, [London: Epworth, 1941], p. 303 f.

<sup>138</sup> Sangster, *The Path to Perfection*, p. 98.

<sup>139</sup> Curtis, O.A., *The Christian Faith*, [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1905], p.375 f. He identified the key passage in Wesley's Journal as being 24 December 1744: Here Wesley wrote: "In the evening I found such light and strength as I never remember to have had before. I saw every thought as well as every action or word, just as it was rising from my heart; and whether it was right before God, or tainted with pride or selfishness. I never knew before (I mean not as at this time) what it was to be still before God... Thursday 25th: I waked with the grace of God in the same spirit; and about eight, being with two or three that believed in Jesus, I felt such an awe and tender sense of the presence of God as greatly confirmed me therein; so that God was before me all the day long. I sought and found him in every place; and could truly say when I lay down at night 'Now I have lived a day'"

<sup>140</sup> Flew, *The Idea of Perfection*, p. 330.



The claim, that *Christian Perfection* as an experience, carries with it the witness of the Spirit, is not without its difficulties.

As well as a difficulty pastorally there is a problem theologically. Flew argued that any such claim to a knowledge of perfect Love negates itself for pride is inevitable in any such claim and pride cannot exist alongside love. It is, therefore, a contradiction in terms to speak of being conscious of perfect Love. Psychologically, too, there are difficulties. Critics maintain that it is impossible for any man or woman to sufficiently know the depths of their own being in order to be able to say, 'I am perfected in love'. But this point has already been made, in the context of the problem with definitions, in regard to sin.<sup>141</sup> However, whilst recognising the force of Flew's argument, it is not beyond criticism. The phrase, a 'permanently higher level' suggests that *perfection* continues to be seen in terms of a 'finished flawlessness'. Whatever the deficiencies of Wesley and Fletcher's attempts to express perfection as "imperfect perfection", such expressions of the on-going nature of the experience cannot be ignored. Flew's distinction with regard to the assurance of the believer's redemption and the assurance of his or her experience of *Christian Perfection* is open to question.<sup>142</sup> It is true that at the heart of salvation is the believer's consciousness of his or her relationship with God. But it is unfair to suggest that at the heart of any claim to *Christian Perfection* there is nothing other than a believer's proud conviction about himself or herself. It could be argued that any conviction about individual salvation belongs to the proud and arrogant. Wesley and Fletcher went to great lengths to ensure that the grace of God was seen as paramount. Indeed, it could be argued that *Christian Perfection* is nothing more or less

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<sup>141</sup> above, pp. 143-163

<sup>142</sup> Lockhart, W.C., *The Evangelical Revival as Reflected in the Life and Works of John William de la Flechere, 1729-1785*, University of Edinburgh, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 1936, p. 233.

than the consciousness of the believer's relationship with God being deepened through the grace of God. In other words *Christian Perfection* was the awareness of being in the hands of One whose presence floods the heart with supernatural love. But was this really all that was being claimed for *Christian Perfection*? Was it not some kind of 'perfect sanctification' or the phrase that Wesley and Fletcher sometimes used: entire sanctification? What was the experience if experience it was?

### **A problem with experience**

Here is the crux of the matter. If *Christian Perfection* is an experience, then what kind of experience is it, and how can the believer know when he or she is living in that experience?

Quite clearly, *Christian Perfection* was not to be perceived as a state. The classical Greek notion of perfection as changelessness has been rejected. It was *Christian Perfection* or *Evangelical Perfection* and as such always admits of progress. *Christian Perfection* in contrast to the Greek idea has been declared as 'imperfect perfection'. Insistence, by Wesley and Fletcher, on retaining the word 'perfection' does raise the question as to whether or not the concept is entirely free from the notion of 'flawlessness'. But assuming, for the moment, that it is, and that the concept of a limited perfection was not a contradiction in terms, the problem remains of how the experience of such a perfection should be perceived. Certainly not, it would seem, as sinlessness, for the concept of 'sinlessness', in the strict understanding of that word, has also been strenuously rejected. True, as with the word perfection, such a rejection was not without its difficulty. Whatever the protestations of Wesley and Fletcher, friend and foe alike have found the conclusion, sinless perfection, to be almost inescapable. But

if this conclusion can be avoided might the experience of *Christian Perfection* be known in a continual awareness of victory over conscious sin? Yet is it possible to claim continual victory over conscious sin? There was no suggestion, at least in later years, that the experience of *Christian Perfection* could not be lost. If it could be lost then the claim of continuous victory must appear to be ridiculous. In the end *Christian Perfection* does not really appear to be offering anything more than what any other believer might experience.

What of the term 'entire sanctification'? Such a term could be taken to imply an experience of 'perfect sanctification' suggesting 'sinlessness' or some such kind of finished state. Indeed, it would appear to be meaningless if it was anything less. If the word did mean what it ordinarily meant how was 'perfect sanctification' to be understood in, what Wesley and Fletcher quite definitely acknowledged to be, an imperfect body? Both men recognised the limitations of the earthly body. Furthermore, how was 'perfect sanctification' to be understood in an imperfect world? Sin in the structural sense cannot be avoided. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed there is a 'sense of religious guilt which feels a general responsibility for that for which the individual agent cannot be immediately responsible'. There is of course biblical precedent to support such an observation.<sup>143</sup> But Wesley and Fletcher do not appear to be aware of this difficulty.<sup>144</sup> Of course, it might be argued that not even Jesus Christ was sinless in this respect.<sup>145</sup>

Against this background it would seem that the experience of 'perfect

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<sup>143</sup> See for example Isaiah 6:5; Daniel 9:4-20.

<sup>144</sup> This however should not be taken to mean that Wesley had no understanding of the social nature of sin. Oden refers to the 'intergenerational sociality of sin' in which Wesley shared the hebraic assumption of the social nature of human existence. So: 'Sins effects reverberate from person to person and from generation to generation.' Oden, T.C., *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*, [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994], p. 172. But this is not yet structural sin as seen in this generation.

<sup>145</sup> Peters, p. 41

sanctification' was really imperfect 'entire sanctification'. But allowing for yet another contradiction in terms if this were so, in what way did the experience of 'entire sanctification' differ from that of gradual sanctification? It appears that the whole notion of *Christian Perfection* continues to die the death of a thousand qualifications.

Of course, something else which further complicates the matter is the terminological recklessness to which the various words are subjected. Terms like, 'sanctification', 'perfection', 'entire sanctification', 'holiness', 'perfect love', can all be used interchangeably when referring to *Christian Perfection*.<sup>146</sup> Sometimes the context will show that one of the terms is more appropriate than the other but not always. So, for example, the word 'sanctification' requires a clear distinction to be made if the reader is to identify whether 'sanctification' or 'entire sanctification' is intended. But such a distinction is not always clear. The word may be intended to be understood as 'entire sanctification' but it may just as readily be understood as part of the whole on going process of regeneration. However, whatever the inconsistency on this matter, it is difficult to understand 'entire sanctification' in any other way than that of completion, an understanding which would seem to be confirmed by the emphasis on the instantaneous nature of *Christian Perfection*. Yet, as the previous section has shown,<sup>147</sup> Wesley and Fletcher persisted in holding on to the idea that *Christian Perfection* would always be one of continual growth. In simple terms this does not make sense if *Christian Perfection* as an experience is to be seen as 'perfect sanctification' or 'entire sanctification'.

One way of coping with the problem is to see the crisis experience of

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<sup>146</sup> See Lindstrom, p. 127; Peters, p. 63 f. Wesley directly and indirectly acknowledged the difficulty of including all that was meant by *Christian Perfection* and excluding all that was not meant by the term.

<sup>147</sup> See pp. 163-175.



*Christian Perfection* as one of final preparation for heaven, occurring at or near the end of life. David Cubie, writing out of the Holiness Movement, argues for this option.<sup>148</sup> He points to the references in Wesley and Fletcher which offer the view that perfection only comes 'gradually' and after a 'long time', 'generally at the instant of death'. When referring to *Christian Perfection*, he notes that Wesley and Fletcher use superlative language and also the language of completion. Again, the teleological usage of the concepts associated with crises, such as sanctification by faith, baptism with the Holy Spirit and eradication, as well as the growth crisis symbols of birth, death and healing, he also sees as pointing to a final preparation for heaven. With such evidence so overwhelmingly supporting the idea that *Christian Perfection* was a crisis of 'perfect sanctification' occurring at or near the end of life, Cubie believes it would be inappropriate to apply connotations, belonging to that experience alone, to what he describes as the 'inaugural' experience. He defines the 'inaugural' experience as a "preparatory experience giving cleansing and power for Christian living and service".<sup>149</sup> In his opinion, the expectations of this experience were not to be compared with the 'psychological perfection' portrayed in Wesley and Fletcher.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, to do so, would be to set the 'inaugural' experience too high and go beyond the scriptural description of the Spirit-filled life.<sup>151</sup> Cubie maintained that usually only after a series of 'growth-crisis stages' would this 'inaugural' experience finally culminate in the crisis experience of *Christian Perfection* as taught by Wesley and Fletcher.

A major difficulty in adopting this approach is that Wesley and Fletcher appear to identify the experience which should neither be 'too high' or 'too

<sup>148</sup> Cubie, David L., *Perfection in Wesley and Fletcher: Inaugural or Teleological?*, **Wesleyan Theological Journal**, 1976 No.11, pp 22-37.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p.22

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p.23

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p.29.

low', as *Christian Perfection*, an experience, in their view, clearly scriptural and attainable in this life. Nonetheless, if Cubie's analysis is correct then it would be important to know what the 'inaugural' experience should be called and whether or not it should be described as normative Christian experience. If it is, as it seems to be implied, that this inaugural experience is the step required to experience the Spirit-filled life then it is relevant to enquire as to whether or not Wesley and Fletcher would have understood it as such. It is true evidence may be produced to substantiate the claim that both men saw *Christian Perfection* as an instantaneous experience occurring at or near the end of life. It is, however, very doubtful whether Wesley or Fletcher could be cited as supporting another major crisis experience of lesser quality than that of *Christian Perfection*.

Of course, if the experience of *Christian Perfection* itself was to be seen in terms of the Spirit-filled life rather than perfect sanctification at the end of life, it would be relevant to consider the nature of the crisis of what many within the Pentecostal tradition have called 'the baptism of the Spirit'.<sup>152</sup> True, in the past, any suggestion that the experience of *Christian Perfection* could be compared to the experience of the 'baptism in the Spirit' has met with a very mixed response, if not to say strong opposition, certainly within

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<sup>152</sup> Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation*, p.52.

Wesleyan scholarship in the United States of America.<sup>153</sup> Wesley, it is argued, far from relating *Christian Perfection* to 'the baptism in the Spirit', explicitly rejects such a comparison.<sup>154</sup> Hence George A. Turner's fairly representative comment:

"John and Charles Wesley said or wrote little about the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This emphasis is relatively recent. It is not easy to find Wesleyan writers devoting much space to it or associating it with entire sanctification and evangelical perfection"<sup>155</sup>

It is Fletcher who gets the dubious credit for, at least being influential in, if not actually equating *Christian Perfection* with 'the baptism of the Spirit'. But, as already noted, this is a matter of historical interpretation.<sup>156</sup> That Wesley and Fletcher had a disagreement on this point cannot be denied but what is open for debate is precisely what that disagreement was and

<sup>153</sup> see for example: Dayton, D.W., *Asa Mahan and the Development of the American Holiness Theology*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 1974, No. 9, pp. 60-69; Dayton, D.W., *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, (New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1987) pp. 48 ff; Knight, J.A., *John Fletcher's Influence on the Development of Wesleyan Theology in America*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 1978 No 13, pp.13-33; Langford, T.A., *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), pp. 141-143; McGonigle, H., *Pneumatological Nomenclature in Early Methodism*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 1973, No. 8, pp. 61-72; (Dr McGonigle is the only exception to the above names in that he is a British Nazarene) A strong contrary view to the above can be found in: Smith, T.L., *How John Fletcher Became the Theologian of Wesleyan Perfectionism, 1770-1776*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 1980, No. 15, pp. 68-87., see also *The Doctrine of the Sanctifying Spirit in John Wesley and John Fletcher*, *Preacher's Magazine*, September-November, 1979, pp. 16-17, 54-58; Deasley, A.R.G, *Entire Sanctification and the Baptism with the Holy Spirit: Perspectives on the biblical view of the relationship*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 1978, No. 14, pp.27-44.

<sup>154</sup> See, for example, the letter to Joseph Benson in 1770: "And you allow the whole thing I contend for; an entire deliverance from sin, a recovery of the whole image of God, the loving God with all our heart, soul and strength. And you believe God is able to give you this; yea in an instant...If they like to call this 'receiving the Holy Ghost' they may: Only the phrase in that sense, is not scriptural, and not quite proper; for they all received the Holy Ghost when they were justified'. *Letters*, Vol. V, p 215. However in contrast to this, Wesley writing again to Benson in 1771 states: "A babe in Christ (of whom I know thousands) has the witness sometimes. A young man (in St John's sense) has it continually. I believe one that is perfected in love, or filled with the Holy Ghost, may be properly termed father. This we must press both babes and young men to aspire after - yea to expect. And why not now? I wish you would give another reading to the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*". *Letters*, Vol. V, p. 229.

<sup>155</sup> Turner, G.A., *The Vision which Transforms*, [Kansas: Beacon Hill Press, 1964], p.122.

<sup>156</sup> Chapter 3 Christian Perfection: Wesley and Fletcher compared pp. 141 f.

whether their differences amounted to anything more than 'semantic' or 'terminological' variations. As Dayton, who argued strongly that Fletcher differed significantly from Wesley acknowledged, the historical evidence on this point is fragmentary.<sup>157</sup> There can be no doubt that Wesley saw the 'baptism of the Spirit' as new birth. He probably wanted to avoid any charge, from his Calvinist opponents, of diminishing the Spirit's work in regeneration. However, this being said, his clear emphasis on the Spirit's work at every stage of the Christian life is surely hard to deny. From the mysterious operations of prevenient grace right through to the goal of *Christian Perfection* the whole work of salvation is dependent on the Spirit. He wrote:

"As all merit is in the Son of God, in what he has done and suffered for us, so all power is in the Spirit of God. And therefore every man, in order to believe unto salvation must receive the Holy Ghost. This is essentially necessary to every christian, not in order to his working miracles, but in order to faith, peace, joy, and love—the ordinary fruits of the spirit... But however it is expressed, it is certain all true faith, and the whole work of salvation, every good thought, word and work, is altogether by the operation of the Spirit of God."<sup>158</sup>

But perhaps more specifically and significantly, he informed the Bishop of Gloucester, Dr Warburton, that 'whatsoever of holiness and perfection is wanting in our nature must be supplied by the Spirit of God'.<sup>159</sup> So he quoted approvingly in the *Plain Account* the hymn of Charles which identifies the work of *Christian Perfection* with the power of the 'sanctifying Spirit'.<sup>160</sup> This point is made with even more clarity in his own compilation of three single verse paraphrases taken from Charles Wesley's *Short Hymns on Select*

<sup>157</sup> Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, p. 49 ff.

<sup>158</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. 11, p. 108

<sup>159</sup> *Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 376.

<sup>160</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 385 f.



*Passages of Scripture* (1762).<sup>161</sup> The opening verses are as follows:

O come and dwell in me,  
Spirit of power within!  
And bring the glorious liberty  
From sorrow fear and sin.

The seed of sin's disease,  
Spirit of finished Holiness,  
Spirit of health remove,  
Spirit of perfect love.<sup>162</sup>

Of course, if the promise of cleansing in Ezekiel<sup>163</sup> was regarded by Wesley as one of the clearest in offering salvation from all sin<sup>164</sup> it is not unreasonable to conclude that the agent in the work, God's Spirit, had not escaped his notice. True, Fletcher's writings can be seen to make the work of the Spirit more explicit but it could be argued that this was already implicit in Wesley. It is also important to note that Fletcher acknowledged his over-emphasis in the area of the Spirit and registered his desire to correct any imbalance.<sup>165</sup> T.L. Smith argued, quite convincingly, that Fletcher, after Wesley's criticisms, reworked the manuscript which was to become the *Last Check*, so as to allow the three thousand converted at Pentecost to be 'unambiguous examples of the New birth'.<sup>166</sup> There was no question that they had received the Holy Spirit but this was not to equated with the fullness of perfect love. As the sermon outline on Acts 1: 5 clearly shows, Fletcher applied the message regarding the 'baptism of the Spirit' to all humankind. In his application he noted:

"1. Unconverted – Rest in no baptism, but that of the Holy Ghost

<sup>161</sup> See the *Companion to Hymns and Psalms* [London: Methodist Publishing House, 1984], p.195 f.

<sup>162</sup> Hymn: *O come and dwell in me*, *Hymns and Psalms* 293. v.1,2.

<sup>163</sup> Ezekiel 36: 25-29.

<sup>164</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 389.

<sup>165</sup> See Tyerman, *Wesley's Designated Successor*, p. 310. A letter to Joseph Benson, dated 20 March 1774.

<sup>166</sup> Smith, *How John Fletcher Became the Theologian of Wesleyan Perfectionism, 1770-1776*, p.79.

and fire. Water baptism will condemn you alone.

2. John's disciples – Promised, the thing promised, the time, – O continue with one accord.

3. Believers. – You want fresh baptism, till the Holy Ghost, which is grace, fill your soul."<sup>167</sup>

He did not restrict the 'baptism of the Spirit' to one or two special occasions. Each 'baptism' apparently moved the individual as far as his or her faith was able to receive, rendering further baptisms necessary until he or she was perfected in love. Obviously the matter of precision in language and terms did not trouble Fletcher either! However, irrespective of any divide between Wesley and Fletcher at this point, the issue of whether the experience of 'baptism in the Spirit' in its Pentecostal emphasis can in any way throw light on the experience of *Christian Perfection* still stands. It may be that if there is some subsequent spiritual crisis to be discovered then the experience of the 'baptism in the spirit' may be a more biblically correct presentation than the perceived Wesleyan expression of 'perfect sanctification'.

Of course, the fact that the modern Pentecostal movement can be seen to have some of its roots in early Methodism has already made it unacceptable to some. Bruner commented:

"Methodism is the most important of the modern traditions for the student of Pentecostal origins to understand, for 18th century Methodism is the mother of the 19th century American Holiness movement which in turn bore 20th century Pentecostalism... Before John Wesley there may have been no such fully developed doctrine of a definite second work of grace, but since Wesley almost all who have embraced this doctrine have been, wittingly or not Wesley's children, and today most prominent of these is Pentecostalism."<sup>168</sup>

A Catholic priest in Chile expressed a similar thought when he stated:

"The Pentecostal movement is Methodism brought to its ultimate

<sup>167</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 465.

<sup>168</sup> Bruner, *The Theology of the Holy Spirit*, p.37,39.

Against this background the observation that the influence of perfectionism has waned in the face of the spread of the charismatic movement is certainly worthy of note.<sup>170</sup> The current widespread movement of the so called ‘Toronto blessing’<sup>171</sup> has certainly ensured that the ‘Spirit baptism’ stream has not dried up. However, the basic question for any experience of ‘baptism of the spirit’ with its variations of ‘Toronto Blessing’ is still the same as it has been for the Wesleyan experience of ‘perfect sanctification’: can any such experience be substantiated from scripture? Certainly, since Taylor’s conclusion that there was no real biblical basis for the notion of instantaneous sanctification, a lot more work has been done on the New Testament texts and narratives.<sup>172</sup>

Bruner’s work, *The Theology of the Holy Spirit*, already referred to, is a significant example of such work in this area. Bruner stated that his purpose is as a systematic theologian concerned with the question of whether the Pentecostal teaching on the experience of the Spirit is in agreement with the teaching in the New Testament. After examining the main biblical sources used by Pentecostalism for such an experience he concludes there is no New Testament support for such an experience of the ‘baptism in the Spirit’. The New Testament, he argued, does not divide the blessing of salvation between Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is wrong to imply, as the

<sup>169</sup> Vergara, I., *El Protestantismo en Chile*, [Santiago de Chile: Editorial del Pacifico, S.A., 1962], pp. 127 f. quoted in Bruner, p. 27.

<sup>170</sup> Sceats, D.D., *Perfection*, in, Ferguson, S.B., Wright, D.F., (eds), *The Dictionary of Theology*, [Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1988], p. 505 f.

<sup>171</sup> For some explanation of this phenomenon which began in the Airport Church Toronto around 1994 and spread worldwide see: Porter, S.E., Richter, P.J., (eds), *The Toronto Blessing-Or is it?*, [London: Darton Longman Todd, 1995]. From the Wesleyan perspective McGonigle has argued that there are no obvious links between “the Methodist Revival and the ‘Toronto experience’.” McGonigle, H., *John Wesley and the ‘Toronto Experience’: Are they linked?*, *The Flame*, [Weston-Super-Mare: Christian Mission Press, Vol 62 No. 3, May-June 1996], pp.4-6,9; Abraham, W., Davies, W. R., Mellor, G. H., *Revival, Toronto and the Church Today*, [Sheffield: Cliff Publishing, 1995]

<sup>172</sup> Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation*, p. 52.

'theology of subsequence' appears to, that conversion belongs to Jesus Christ while the power and gifts belong to the Holy Spirit in a second and subsequent stage of salvation. In implying this, Bruner asserted, Pentecostalism has put itself in the Wesleyan 'straitjacket' of a two-stage experience of salvation which lacks any real biblical foundation. All the blessings of salvation are to be found in Christ and in Christ alone. Thomas Smail, writing from a charismatic reformed stance, accepted the force of Bruner's argument, particularly in relation to any 'second blessing' presentation of the work of the Holy Spirit. But he believed it is still possible to argue for legitimacy of the Pentecostal experience without relying on a 'second blessing Pentecostalism'. He argued that only by a very selective choice of extreme statements has Bruner been able to claim that 'Pentecostalism has imprisoned itself' within the Wesleyan 'straitjacket'. He maintained that the Pentecostals, in practice, have 'a far greater grasp of the centrality of Christ and his grace' than Bruner allowed.<sup>173</sup> He pointed to a central affirmation of the Pentecostals that Jesus Christ is the baptiser in the Holy Spirit. So seeking to establish the 'christological' basis of 'pneumatology',<sup>174</sup> Smail argued that 'the baptism in the Spirit' should not be seen as something 'subsequent to and distinct from becoming a Christian'<sup>175</sup> but rather as the 'specific activity of Christ in releasing the Spirit in our conscious experience'.<sup>176</sup> Such a release of the Spirit is significant 'because its marks a breakthrough into a fresh dimension' of a believer's relationship with Christ.<sup>177</sup> But while Smail has made a genuine attempt to remove the false dichotomy between Christ and the Spirit he is still open to the charge of a 'theology of subsequence'. The 'Pentecostal experience',

<sup>173</sup> Smail, T.A., *Reflected Glory*, [London: Hodder&Stoughton, 1975], p. 41.

<sup>174</sup> Heron, A., *The Holy Spirit*, [London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1983], p. 133.

<sup>175</sup> Taylor, J.V., *The Go-Between God*, [London:S.C.M., 1972], p. 199.

<sup>176</sup> Smail, p. 145.

<sup>177</sup> Smail, p. 153.



even though freed from its 'second blessing' dress, remains subsequent to conversion. While it is true that it should not be described as 'Christianity plus something', it may, on Smail's own admission, be legitimately described as a 'baptism of the Spirit'. Having acknowledged the existence of a 'Pentecostal experience', be it ever so broadly defined, and having insisted on retaining this phrase, Smail's rejection of a two stage salvation must appear to some as suspect.

Professor Dunn<sup>178</sup> rejected completely the idea that the phrase 'baptism of the Spirit' can ever be validly applied to any post-conversion experience. He described the 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' as a 'conversion-initiation' event experienced by all believers.<sup>179</sup> He maintained that the biblical evidence showed that Spirit-baptism was perceived as part, and a main part, of the whole complex process of what it meant to become a Christian. A person could not be a Christian in the true biblical sense unless he or she had experienced all the elements of the 'conversion-initiation' package. These elements were repentance, faith, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. While Dunn acknowledged the firm basis for the Pentecostal's belief in the dynamic and experimental nature of Spirit-baptism, he maintained that the separation of it from conversion was entirely unwarranted.<sup>180</sup> Dunn has praised the Pentecostal attempt to restore the New Testament emphasis on the experience of the Spirit. As he saw it, they were reacting on the one hand against the 'mechanical sacramentalism of extreme Catholicism' and on the other hand, against the 'dead biblicist orthodoxy of extreme Protestantism'. This, Dunn believed, had resulted in the renewed

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<sup>178</sup> Dunn, J.D.G., *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, [London:S.C.M., 1970]. This is another significant work coming in the wake of the increasing influence of Pentecostalism. It was published in the same year as Bruner's, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*. Though Dunn writes from the perspective of a New Testament scholar.

<sup>179</sup> Dunn, p. 4 f.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

focus, in the Church, on this experience of the Spirit.<sup>181</sup> Despite this, however, in his opinion, the Pentecostals have made two 'unfortunate' errors. Firstly, in common with the Catholic but contrary to the New Testament, the Pentecostal separated Spirit-baptism from the event of 'conversion-initiation'.<sup>182</sup> Secondly, and this time in common with the Protestant, the Pentecostal separated faith from water-baptism, making the latter 'little more than a confession of a past commitment'.<sup>183</sup> This also was contrary to New Testament teaching and not the role given to water-baptism in the New Testament. According to Dunn water-baptism was neither to be regarded as a 'mere symbol' nor as an 'instrument of divine power'.<sup>184</sup> Rather it was to be seen as 'the expression of the faith to which God gives the Spirit'.<sup>185</sup> While the force of Dunn's scholarship is evident his thesis has not gone unchallenged. On the Pentecostal side, Howard M. Ervin examined with equal rigour the same biblical data as Dunn, and arrived at the conclusion that 'the conversion-initiation hypothesis rests upon no empirically verifiable base'.<sup>186</sup> Laurence W. Wood, from the Wesleyan perspective on the other hand, acknowledged Dunn's work as 'pivotal' to any discussion on whether 'entire sanctification' is effected through the in filling of the Holy Spirit.<sup>187</sup> So within the Wesleyan camp examples for and

<sup>181</sup> Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p.225.

<sup>182</sup> Though, of course, for the Catholic, as Dunn points out, conversion occurs at water-baptism.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p 226 f.

<sup>184</sup> In the former the common notion of adult baptism is in view while in the latter the sacramental idea is in view. (The divine power 'operates on the person without his or her knowledge or consent' p.227.)

<sup>185</sup> Dunn, p.227.

<sup>186</sup> Ervin, H.M., *Conversion-Initiation and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1984], p.163.

<sup>187</sup> Wood, L. W., *Exegetical-Theological Reflections on the Baptism with the Holy Spirit*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, No.14, Spring/Fall 1979, p.51.

against can found.<sup>188</sup> In the end, if a position is to be adopted, it would seem to be a matter of opinion as to which side more accurately represents the biblical position. Both sides are equally convincing in their arguments. Of course, the question for this thesis is whether Spirit-baptism can offer a more biblically correct way of expressing the experience aspect of *Christian Perfection* than the Wesleyan approach. An answer to this question will be attempted in the next chapter.

Probably the most acceptable interpretation of the experience of *Christian Perfection* has been that of 'Perfect love'. Packer, a theologian in the Evangelical Anglican tradition, in a critique of *Christian Perfection*, boldly asserted that Wesley should have called his doctrine, 'the imparting of total love or total love for short...'<sup>189</sup> Certainly it is generally acknowledged that love is central not only to *Christian Perfection* but also to the whole of Methodist theology.<sup>190</sup> Wesley summed it up as 'pure love reigning alone in the heart and life'. Fletcher agreed and quoted Wesley:

"It were well you should be thoroughly sensible of this: the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion: there is in effect nothing else. If you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way. And when you are asking others, 'Have you received

<sup>188</sup> Lyon, R.W., *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, No.14, Spring/Fall1979, pp18 ff. Lyon is in essential agreement with Dunn's thesis that Spirit-baptism is associated with conversion; Grider, J.K., *Spirit-baptism the means of Sanctification: a response to the Lyon view*, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*: No. 14, Spring/Fall 1979, pp 31 ff.

<sup>189</sup> Packer, J.I., *Keep in Step With the Spirit*, [Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984 reprint 1990], p.139.

<sup>190</sup> Consider, for example, the following: '...to be Wesleyan is to be committed to a theology of love', Wynkoop, M.B. *A Theology of love*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1972), p.101; 'The center of Methodist theology was love..' Albin T.R., *John Wesley*, in *New Dictionary of Theology*, p. 719; "This is the sum of Christian Perfection - loving God and loving neighbour - these contain the whole of Christian Perfection" quoted in Outler, A.C., *Willson Lectures*, [Washington: Wesley Theological Seminary, 1973], p. 16; 'Love was the key dynamic in Wesley's whole life and theology', Snyder H.A., *The Radical Wesley*, [Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980], p.88; Perfection is when 'the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Holiness...perfects us by filling us full to the brim, full to overflowing with the love that loves like God' Maas R., *Crucified Love: The Practice of Christian Perfection*, [Nashville: Abingdon, 1989], p.39.

this or that blessing?' if you mean anything but more love you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them on a false scent. Settle it then in your heart that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing but more of that love described in 1 Corinthians 13. You can go no higher than this, till you are carried to Abraham's bosom."<sup>191</sup>

However, while such a stance focused on the positive aspect of *Christian Perfection*, it remained 'love excluding sin'.<sup>192</sup> The logic being that the 'soul be filled with so entire a love to [God] that [it] may love nothing but for his sake'.<sup>193</sup> But the issue once more must be: does the biblical evidence support the claim? Packer believed the biblical evidence at best is inconclusive. He asserted that Wesley had failed to distinguish correctly between the 'now' and the 'not yet' in the saving work of God.<sup>194</sup> The theological rationale required to support the notion of a heart full of the love of God is completely unrealistic. For this to be true, Packer maintained that sin would have to be totally eradicated.<sup>195</sup> John and Charles Wesley, according to Packer, did claim such an eradication for the experience of *Christian Perfection*. Yet he maintained that any individual who dares to make a similar claim will find the practical reality of daily living presented a dilemma. That dilemma is: how will he or she, who believes sin to be eradicated, account for his or her continuing sinfulness?<sup>196</sup> For Packer the counter-thrust of Romans 7 was inescapable.<sup>197</sup> It read:

"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I

<sup>191</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI., p. 213.

<sup>192</sup> *Letters*, Vol. V, p. 223.

<sup>193</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 368.

<sup>194</sup> Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p.140.

<sup>195</sup> Though Packer does allow that there are 'moments' when a believer may become 'immune' to besetting sins, such is his or her awareness of the Lord's presence, for shorter or longer periods. Chapter 5 *Christian Perfection: A solution offered*, p. 212 f.

<sup>196</sup> Packer, p. 142.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.



agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but the sin that dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin"<sup>198</sup>

The only coherent exegesis of this passage he believed was the Augustinian one which interpreted it as a description of the Apostles' current experience. On any Wesleyan analysis this must mean that Paul had not yet received the blessing.<sup>199</sup> Packer concluded therefore that 'total love, wholly free from any admixture of sinful and self-seeking motivation, is heaven's promised life but it is not attained here on earth'.<sup>200</sup> Clearly the main focus of Packer's critique of total love lies in the frequently criticised area of *Christian Perfection's* apparent insistence on the removal of sin. Whether or not there is an adequate rebuttal of such criticisms must be the concern of the next chapter.

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<sup>198</sup> Romans 7: 14-25.

<sup>199</sup> Packer, *Keep in step with the Spirit*, p. 144.

<sup>200</sup> Packer, p.145.

## Chapter 5 Christian Perfection—A solution offered

### Introduction

'Damaged beyond repair' was how Beck described the structure of the doctrine of *Christian Perfection*,<sup>1</sup> and the problem areas considered in the previous chapter have highlighted that damage.

Nevertheless, despite such major difficulties, Methodists, like Beck, have continued to argue for what they see as the validity of the 'driving force' behind the doctrine. At the heart of *Christian Perfection*, it is claimed, are 'deep convictions' about the nature of the Christian faith which the Church must never lose.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Wesley himself in the *Plain Account* could be said to have made a similar point when in his concluding summary he, in effect, pleaded that the baby of *Christian Perfection* should not be thrown out with the imperfect bath water of his structure.<sup>3</sup> But if the framework in which the experience has been expressed is so defective, can *Christian Perfection* as such really remain? In other words: is there a baby at all? This thesis maintains that while the structure of *Christian Perfection* is indeed open to serious criticism, there is a reality of experience lying behind the faulty intellectual framework which ought to be given fresh expression. As McGrath has pointed out, doctrines are fundamentally concerned with experience.<sup>4</sup> He recalls Augustine's analogy that doctrine is like a hedge that protects a field. The field represents all the 'richness of the Christian's redemptive encounter with the living God through Jesus Christ' while the hedge represents the doctrine which puts the encounter into words

<sup>1</sup> Beck, B.E., Perfect Love?, *Methodist Recorder*, 21 February 1991, p. 20

<sup>2</sup> For Beck these are: 1. Conversion is not the end. 2. Renewal is not the product of human effort. 3. There is no limit to what God can do. 4. Holiness can be summed up as love. 5. Love, nevertheless must not be moralised away.

<sup>3</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p.443.

<sup>4</sup> McGrath, A. E., *Justification by Faith*, [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Zondervan, 1990], p.13.

ensuring that succeeding generations will have the same opportunity of discovering the experience for themselves. No doubt, such attempts in explaining what has taken place will by their very nature suffer various inadequacies. Putting the experience of the divine into words is no easy task. Yet, as the Incarnation and the Scriptures have clearly demonstrated, as God has accommodated himself to mere human existence with all the fallibility of its language and culture<sup>5</sup> there is a good precedent to follow. So all Christian experience should be subjected to rigorous thinking in order to construct thought and impart spiritual truth, thus enabling the Word to again become flesh. True, there must always be a humble acknowledgment that no form of words can ultimately have priority over the living reality and experience which lie behind them. Here the words of T.S. Eliot are worth noting, 'We had the experience but missed the meaning...'<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless this should not stop further conscientious attempts to express more accurately the experience of the divine. Failure to do so will only create a vacuum from which false and misleading understandings may produce serious and damaging consequences. What experience of God, then, does *Christian Perfection* point to and how, despite the problems and difficulties in the 'hedging' of the past, can it be verbalised in a way that is consistent with the Scriptures and understood in the late 20th century?

### **Christian Perfection: The Wesley/Fletcher 'category of interpretation'<sup>7</sup> for 'normal' Christianity**

Certainly *Christian Perfection* comes with a real image problem for

<sup>5</sup> Young, F., *Methodist Recorder*, Thursday, 28 July, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in McGrath, *Justification by Faith*, p.14

<sup>7</sup> It is Otto who uses this phrase in relation to holiness. Otto, R., *The Idea of the Holy*, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1958 English Translation], p. 5. The present writer first began to think of its use in connection with Christian Perfection after reading Michael Eaton in Eaton, M. A., *Baptism with the Spirit*, [Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, 1989], p. 238

whatever experience might be intended the name most readily suggests what it has most often been seen to be: an experience of some 'perfect' or 'sinless' state. But any suggestion of moral or sinless perfection is regarded as contrary to scripture and experience and never to be presented as a realisable goal for humanity on earth. Wesley and Fletcher strenuously rejected any such claims for *Christian Perfection* of course, but friend and foe alike continued to be unconvinced by such protests. As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, much of the criticism of the concept remains focused on this area. That 'perfection' and 'sinlessness' are called for in scripture is not in dispute.<sup>8</sup> What is in dispute is that they are held out as a goal that can be realised on this earth. *Perfection* and sinlessness offer a future hope for the Christian's glorification but in the interim they must only be seen as a vision which inspires. The insistence of Wesley and Fletcher in retaining the word 'perfect' and qualifying the word 'sin' confirmed their critics' worst suspicions that the vision was really being turned into an earthly possibility. Hence the dismissal of the Wesley/Fletcher concept. But if their denial of 'sinless perfection' is to be taken seriously then some other creditable explanation should be given. The context of controversy gives the clue.

### **A context of controversy**

*Christian Perfection* was part of the theological controversies which Wesley's Methodists had with the Calvinist Evangelicals.<sup>9</sup> As Fletcher's *Last Check* showed, the heart of the issue was how to deal with the problem of 'indwelling sin'. This was what the *Thirty-Nine Articles* had identified as the

<sup>8</sup> Chapter 4: Christian Perfection: the problems examined, pp.143-163.

<sup>9</sup> See Brown-Lawson, A., *John Wesley and the Anglican Evangelicals of the Eighteenth Century*, [Edinburgh: The Pentland Press, 1994], pp.271 ff. Dr Brown-Lawson identifies the controversies such issues as universal or particular redemption, the imputed righteousness of Christ, perfection and perseverance.



'infection of nature'<sup>10</sup> which remained in the individual after conversion. The Calvinists regarded this 'infection' as so deeply woven into the fabric of fallen human nature that ultimately only death itself could bring complete deliverance from it. While accepting that the Christian had in Christ been delivered from the penalty of sin, they rejected any suggestion that he or she could also be delivered from the presence of sin. Such a state was regarded by them as being both biblically and experientially unsound. This was not to say that the Christian could not know something of an ongoing experience of being delivered from the power of sin. In the process of sanctification the Christian could know a gradual victory over 'indwelling sin' as he or she learnt to mortify the 'sinful nature' through the grace of God. But this would only ever be partial for, as Augustine had stated, 'we must sin as long as we are in the body.'<sup>11</sup> The 'flesh' would continue to be the thing with which the Christian would struggle until death. So Whitefield when writing to Harris(1714-1773), the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist and one of the leading preachers in the Evangelical Awakening in Wales, whom he had mistakenly thought was at one with the Wesleys in holding to sinless perfection, stated:

"I speak thus, because you seem offended that some affirm there is no such thing as dominion over indwelling sin, nor rest from working for life wholly! We shall never have such dominion over indwelling sin as to be entirely delivered from the stirring of it; and the greatest saint cannot be assured, but some time or other, for his humiliation or punishment for unfaithfulness, God may permit it to break out into actual breach of His law, and in a gross way too. Let us not be high minded, but fear. It is equally true, that we shall not rest wholly from working for life; for whilst there is any part of us unregenerate, that part will be always leading us to the old covenant. But I suppose you have been tintured with the doctrine of sinless perfection. No wonder you write thus..."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Noll, p. 261 f.

<sup>11</sup> quoted in *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> Tyerman, L., *The Life of the Revd George Whitefield*, [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1890,] Vol. 2 pp. 478 ff.

Such was the intractability of sin that not even the greatest saint could ever be sure when or where the 'indwelling sin' might reassert itself again. But assert itself it would and not until he or she had departed the fallen body and the fallen world could complete deliverance be fully assured. To suggest anything else was tantamount to offering 'sinless perfection'. Wesley and Fletcher, however, perceived this to be nothing short of a complete denial of the Christian's birthright to experience victory over sin. Christianity offered more than a 'sinning religion'. Such a presentation was a limitation of God's grace needlessly condemning the believer to a life of civil war for the rest of his or her life. It was just such an approach that encouraged the 'Antinomian sloth' which Wesley and Fletcher believed was so damaging to spiritual health. There must be more to the grace of God than this! While the Calvinists had no desire to down-grade the grace of God, they regarded the Methodist stance as failing to appreciate fully the radical nature of sin and tending towards the heresy of Pelagianism.<sup>13</sup> It could only be self-delusion that would make a believer think he or she was free from 'indwelling sin'.

### **A key biblical passage**

The key biblical passage with regard to the problem of 'indwelling sin' was Romans 7: 14-25.<sup>14</sup> Here, as far as the Calvinists were concerned, was clear testimony from none other than the great apostle himself that the Christian could never escape that 'old covenant'. Paul's words, 'carnal sold under sin' summed up the difficulties of 'indwelling sin' perfectly. But Fletcher and the Methodists would have none of this, claiming that it was an incorrect

<sup>13</sup> This view suggested that a human being could in the initial step make his or her own way towards salvation apart from the assistance of God's grace. It tended to see sin in terms of individual sins rather than the state of sin which underlay individual sins!

<sup>14</sup> This of course as we have seen would also be seen as central today. Chapter 4, Christian Perfection: the problems examined, pp. 189 f.

interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Fletcher argued that Paul here was not describing his own personal struggles but rather was speaking 'figuratively' as a representative of the Jewish nation. Wesley, in the *Explanatory Notes*, while not using the word 'representative' had a similar line. He commented at the beginning of the debated passage, verses 7-13:

"The character here assumed is that of a man, first ignorant of the law, then under it, and sincerely, but ineffectually, striving to serve God. To have spoken this of himself, or any true believer, would have been foreign to the whole scope of his discourse; nay utterly contrary thereto..."<sup>16</sup>

In this respect, both men had the support of recent scholarly opinion. Trudinger, for example, in an article on Romans 7: 7-25 concluded:

"(Paul) is speaking as a representative Jew, seeing himself in solidarity with Israel's historical experience, not witnessing to his own present convictions. This interpretation keeps Romans 7: 7-25 as an integral part of Paul's total argument with respect to his understanding of salvation history, and not a digression outlining his own personal struggles".<sup>17</sup>

Demann regarded the autobiographical interpretation as having been 'relegated to the museum of exegetical absurdities'.<sup>18</sup> At the heart of the debate is whether this passage refers to the life of the believer presently or whether it describes life before and outside of Christ. Scholars continue to

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<sup>15</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p.19 f; Chapter 2, Christian Perfection: Fletcher's elaboration, pp.57-59.

<sup>16</sup> *Notes*, p.227

<sup>17</sup> Trudinger, P., *An Autobiographical Digression?*, *The Expository Times*, [Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, Vol. 107 Number 6 March 1996], p. 173 f.

<sup>18</sup> quoted in Leenhardt, F.J., *The Epistle of Romans*, [London: Lutterworth, 1961], p.181.

be divided.<sup>19</sup> In the opinion of the present writer, Fee identified the three matters which strongly favour the view that Paul was describing life outside of Christ from the perspective of one who is himself now in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Firstly, Paul's major concern had to do with the Torah.<sup>21</sup> Is it sinful? His answer is a firm 'No'.<sup>22</sup> He then considered how something good like the Torah could be implicated in something as horrible as death.<sup>23</sup> But in doing this he showed it was not the Torah but sin which was responsible for death. So living under the Torah, while people may in their minds assent to what God required they could never achieve it.<sup>24</sup> That this was so was because of another law, the 'law of sin'.<sup>25</sup> The failure of the Torah then was that it could show the good but it could not give the power to achieve that good.<sup>26</sup> This was the cause of the cry of the 'wretched man' in verse 25.<sup>27</sup> Here was the painful truth of what it was like to live under the Law. But, as Fee pointed out, in Romans 7: 1-6 and 8: 1-4 where Paul was referring to

<sup>19</sup> In favour of before and outside of Christ see for example: Stendahl K., *The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West*, in **Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays**, [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976], pp.78-96; Sanders, E.P., **Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People**, [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], p p.70-86. Moo, D.J., *Israel and Paul in Romans 7: 7-12*, **New Testament Studies**, Vol. 32, 1986, pp.122-135. In favour of the autobiographical see for example: Dunn, J.D.G., *Romans 7: 14-25, in the Theology of Paul*, in Hilbert, P., (ed.), **Essays on Apostolic Themes: Studies in honour of Howard M. Ervin**, [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1985], p p.49-70; Dunn, J.D.G., in Martin R.P., (ed.), **Word Biblical Commentary, Romans**, [Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1988], Volume 38; Packer, J.I., *The Wretched Man of Romans 7*, in **Studia Evangelica**, Vol. II, 1964, pp.621-627; Packer, J.I., **Keep in Step with the Spirit**, pp.143 ff; Cranfield, C.E.B., **The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Romans**, [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975 ].

<sup>20</sup> Fee, G.D., **God's Empowering Presence**, [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994], p. 375 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley is in agreement with this line of interpretation. He states: "This is a kind of digression, to the beginning of the next chapter, wherein the Apostle, in order to show in the most lively manner the weakness and inefficacy of the law..." **Notes**, p. 227.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 7: 7-12

<sup>23</sup> Romans 7: 13. Wesley is again in agreement: He recaps at verse 14: "(Is the Law sin? v.7, and Is the Law death? v.13)" so highlighting the two issues which centre on the Torah. **Notes**, p.227

<sup>24</sup> Romans 7: 14-20

<sup>25</sup> Romans 7: 21

<sup>26</sup> Romans 7: 21-25

<sup>27</sup> Romans 7: 24



the life of the believer such a life was a thing of the past.<sup>28</sup> In Christ, the believer, having died to the 'old covenant', had been released from the imprisonment of the Torah and had been raised to the new life which was now available under the 'new covenant'. Of course, such life had been effected by the life-giving Spirit promised under the 'new covenant'.<sup>29</sup>

Reference to the Spirit raises the second important reason why Romans 7: 7-25 should not be seen as a description of life in Christ. There has been no mention of the Holy Spirit in chapter 7 at all.<sup>30</sup> Such an omission must surely be strange if the Apostle really was reflecting on what was actual in his own experience as a believer. It makes more sense to regard this lack of reference to the Spirit as further confirmation that Paul is dealing with life before, and not after, Christ.

The third reason why Romans 7: 7-25 should not be seen as autobiographical is in 'the argument that precedes and follows' it.<sup>31</sup> In Romans 8 the contrast between the two types of existence already referred to in 7: 5-6, the life of the flesh and the life of the Spirit, is resumed and given elaboration.<sup>32</sup> This clearly suggests that Paul's concern was not with some internal struggle within the Christian but rather about two totally incompatible life styles - those who 'walk according to the flesh' and those who 'walk according to the Spirit'.<sup>33</sup> As Fee points out, there was not even a hint here that this was some 'internal struggle within the Christian breast'.<sup>34</sup>

The contrast was between those under the law and those under the Spirit.

<sup>28</sup> Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p.513

<sup>29</sup> So Paul writes "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death." Romans 8: 2

<sup>30</sup> The only reference to the Spirit/flesh contrast is at verse 14 where it does not refer to the life of the believer but rather is concerned with placing the Spirit on the side of the law. Here the Spirit is not within the believer aiding the believer against indwelling sin but outside on the side of the law. (See also Romans 8: 7-8.)

<sup>31</sup> Fee, p.514

<sup>32</sup> Romans 8: 1-4

<sup>33</sup> Romans 8: 5-8

<sup>34</sup> Fee, p. 514

Those who are under the law struggle with the problem of knowing what is right and even desiring to do what is right but yet are unable to do what is right. But what the law could not do because sin was stronger than the law Christ and the Spirit have now done.<sup>35</sup> As Wesley puts it, the person has escaped from the 'legal to the evangelical state'.<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that the believer does not feel a struggle with sin nor indeed that he or she cannot be overtaken by it.

But this was not the point at issue here. Paul's concern was with God's total plan for the salvation of humankind and not some 'egocentric digression' outlining his own personal struggles.<sup>37</sup> To see it in such individualistic terms could be because it is being read through the eyes of 'the introspective conscience of the West'.<sup>38</sup> However, if this is a correct understanding of the passage, the exegetical problem of Paul's use of the 'I'<sup>39</sup> with the present tense of the verbs still remains to be resolved. Such use, it was maintained, does not suggest a dispassionate 'abstract argument' but has more 'the echo of the personal experience of an anguished soul' about it.<sup>40</sup> As Bruce stated,

"This unequal struggle against the 'law of sin which is in my members' has been the real experience of too many Christians for us to state confidently that Paul cannot be speaking autobiographically here—and in the present tense."<sup>41</sup>

But while accepting that the passage can have resonance with Christian experience (Paul did not deny that people who live 'according to the Spirit' might not lapse into living 'according to the flesh' but this he believed was

<sup>35</sup> Romans 8: 3 f.

<sup>36</sup> **Notes**, Romans 7: 14, p.227

<sup>37</sup> Trudinger, *An Autobiographical Digression?*, **The Expository Times**, p. 174

<sup>38</sup> The words used in the title of Stendahl's essay. See above p. 198 footnote 19

<sup>39</sup> Romans 7: 14

<sup>40</sup> Goguel, M., **The Birth of Christianity**, [1953] p.213 f. quoted in Bruce F.F., **The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans**, [London: Inter-varsity Press, 1963, reprint 1974] p. 151

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152

unnecessary) the exegete cannot ignore the broader context and content of the passage. In the end, the issue is whether this or the use of the personal pronoun will be the determining factor in interpretation. In the opinion of the present writer the latter position can only be taken if the broader context and content of the passage is ignored. The 'representative' interpretation rather than the 'autobiographical' interpretation seems to be the more natural way to understand the passage. From this angle, living 'according to the flesh' and living 'according to the Spirit' are not to be seen as two factions warring inside the Christian but rather as two totally different lifestyles. It was against just such a biblical background that the controversy over 'indwelling sin' took place in the time of Wesley and Fletcher.

Controversy, of course, can make the protagonists of either side exaggerate their own particular perception of the other side's weaknesses. It was not that Wesley and Fletcher had failed to acknowledge the existence of 'indwelling sin' nor the battle which the Christian had to face as a result of it. Rather, their focus was on what they perceived to be the utter failure of Calvinists to present God's grace as the all-sufficient means of dealing with the power of sin within the life of the Christian. To insist, as the Calvinists had done, that the internal civil war situation of Romans 7 would continue until death was intolerable to Wesley and Fletcher. Apart from the fact of encouraging mediocre Christianity and giving a licence to sin, it appeared to offer no real hope for the Christian who desired to live otherwise. As Fletcher described the situation, the Calvinists believed the Christian would know nothing else only a life of struggling 'with the waves of immorality or the billows of corruption' not until death could he or she look forward to something else.<sup>42</sup> There could be then no effective deliverance from 'indwelling sin' until the Christian passes into glory. But this, both men

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<sup>42</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p.406

argued, was an affront to the grace of God and made death a greater saviour than Jesus Christ. Of course, the Calvinists would have regarded such an accusation as ridiculous. They did believe and preach victory over sin through the grace of God even though such a victory was always gradual and could never be fully complete.<sup>43</sup> From beginning to end the grace of God was paramount for them. Indeed, unlike the Methodists, they could be assured of the outcome. The irresistible grace of God would be the guarantee of their final perseverance. As John Newton had expressed it:

"T'was grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears reliev'd;  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers toils and snares  
I have already come;  
T'is grace has brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home."<sup>44</sup>

Yet however wonderful the grace of God was it still did not offer, this side of heaven, perfectibility of fallen human nature. Grace, it was true, had indeed delivered the 'double cure'<sup>45</sup> for the penalty and power of sin but it had not yet removed the Christian from the presence of sin. The Christian would continue to do battle not only with the world and the devil but also with the flesh. And this, Paul had graphically and personally reflected on in the seventh chapter of Romans. Not until the Christian's promotion to glory could he or she expect its end. To the Calvinists, *Christian Perfection* in suggesting a resolution of the conflict through the removal of 'indwelling sin' was holding out a false and extremely dangerous hope. To realise such a hope must mean that fallen nature had been perfected and 'Sinless

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Henry is an example of such a person. Fletcher of course takes him to task. Chapter 2, *Christian Perfection* - Fletcher's elaboration, pp. 71 f.

<sup>44</sup> Amazing Grace, *Hymns and Psalms* 215, for original wording as used here see *Companion to Hymns and Psalms* p. 151.

<sup>45</sup> Toplady, A.M., Rock of Ages, *Hymns and Psalms*, 273, v 1.



Perfection' had been achieved. Scripture and experience were against such an achievement! Whitefield's words to Wesley are pertinent:

"You have set a mark you will never arrive at, till you come to glory. I think few enjoy such continued manifestations of glory of God's presence as I do, and have done for some years; but dare not pretend to say I shall be absolutely perfect."<sup>46</sup>

But Wesley and Fletcher, in spite of the ambiguity of their language, did not want to imply this. As has been noted, the continual qualification of the word 'perfection' along with the persistent denials of claims to sinlessness was aimed at correcting such a misunderstanding. Both Wesley and Fletcher believed in the radical nature of sin resulting from the Fall. They maintained that the believer, whatever his or her experience, would continue to live in a 'shattered corruptible body' and in this respect he or she would be severely limited until the day that 'this mortal puts on immortality'.<sup>47</sup> The notion, therefore, that the believer would ever be sinless on this earth was a non-starter. Perhaps one of clearest indications of this comes in the *Plain Account* when Wesley imagined the following question being asked:

"May not then the very best of men adopt the dying Martyr's confession: 'I am in myself nothing but sin, darkness, hell; but thou art my light, my holiness, my heaven'?"<sup>48</sup>

To which Wesley answered:

"Not exactly. But the best of men may say, 'Thou art my light, my holiness, my heaven. Through my union with thee, I am full of light, of holiness and happiness. But if I were left to myself, I should be nothing but sin, darkness, hell.'"<sup>49</sup>

Here with echoes of Jesus' words in John, 'abide in me and I in you...for without me you can do nothing',<sup>50</sup> Wesley recognised the impossibility of

<sup>46</sup> Tyerman, L., *The Life of the Revd George Whitefield*, Vol. I, p.414.

<sup>47</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p.417; *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p p.374, 417, 442; Chapter 3, Christian Perfection: Wesley and Fletcher Compared, pp. 124 f.

<sup>48</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p.417.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> John 15: 4-5

ever making the atoning work of Christ redundant.<sup>51</sup> Not, of course, that he had ever wanted to, for, as he informed his readers, if there had there been a necessity to choose between the doctrine of *Christian Perfection* or the doctrine of Atonement, *Christian Perfection* would have lost.<sup>52</sup> The Christian would always be utterly dependent on the 'merits' of Christ's death.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, this was so because he or she still lived in the presence of sin. As Fletcher had put it, when defending himself against the accusation of departing from the doctrinal standards of the Church of England, freedom from sin did not mean the removal of the 'poisonous seeds of mortality'.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, living in the presence of sin did not mean that all the believer had to look forward to was a constant internal struggle with sin until he or she died. Whatever else could be said of Christ's redeeming work it must surely be described as 'salvation from sin'.<sup>55</sup> While this was not to be seen as 'perfection' or 'sinlessness', it did offer the believer a quality of life which bore no resemblance at all with the 'wretched man' of Romans 7. Life under the government of the Spirit was in stark contrast to life in 'the flesh'.<sup>56</sup> Of course, without the Spirit no one could be a 'real Christian'.<sup>57</sup> Now Christians could be 'more than conquerors over sin by the Holy Ghost given unto them'.<sup>58</sup> Fletcher can be seen to give further elaboration as to what was intended by 'indwelling sin' :

<sup>51</sup> see this thesis Chapter 1, Christian Perfection: Wesley's exposition, pp. 33 f.

<sup>52</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 418

<sup>53</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 443

<sup>54</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 439 f. Fletcher did not elaborate as to what the 'poisonous seeds' were but that there were different from what might be called natural infirmities does seem to be clear from the context. Certainly he readily accepted that 'all manner of imperfections remain in us, yea in the best of us', therefore 'there neither is nor was any man born into this world, who could say, I am clean from sin, except Jesus Christ'. see *Ibid.*, p.417

<sup>55</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p.442

<sup>56</sup> *Notes*, Romans 8: 9, p.228

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Romans 8: 15, p.229

<sup>58</sup> *Scriptural Christianity*, in *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 2, p.110 f; Chapter 3 Wesley and Fletcher Compared, p.138 ff.

“...the sinful lusts of the flesh, such as mental drunkenness, gluttony, whoredom... unloving diabolical tempers, such as envy, pride, stubbornness, malice, sinful anger, ungodly jealousy, unbelief, fretfulness, impatience, hypocrisy, revenge, or any moral opposition to the will of God.”<sup>59</sup>

To see such things as part of the ‘infection of nature’,<sup>60</sup> the phrase used in the *Thirty-nine Articles*, which must ‘radically and necessarily remain in the hearts of all believers, fathers in Christ not excepted, till death comes...’<sup>61</sup> was according to Fletcher not normal but abnormal for the real Christian.<sup>62</sup> The ‘promise of the Father’ pointed to the power of the Spirit which would enable each believer to live in the reality of what he saw as normal Christianity.<sup>63</sup> Wesley too, as can be seen from the quote above (‘more than conquerors over sin by the Holy Ghost given unto them’) and in an earlier chapter of this thesis,<sup>64</sup> obviously agreed. His comment on the response of Jesus to the rich young ruler is certainly revealing in that it suggests biblical ‘perfection’ was actually about being ‘a real Christian’.<sup>65</sup> Also significant is his description of Montanus as a real scriptural Christian.<sup>66</sup> For Wesley and Fletcher *Christian Perfection* was the ‘category of interpretation’ for such Christianity. To concentrate on the inadequacies of the definitions of ‘perfection’ or ‘sin’ seems to the present writer to miss the whole thrust of *Christian Perfection*. Again and again it has been argued that *Christian Perfection* will only stand when Wesley’s meanings of sin and perfection are applied. Even friends recognise that Wesley’s concept of sin must be understood if his teaching of holiness is to be appreciated.<sup>67</sup> Yet taken

<sup>59</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. V, p.440

<sup>60</sup> Article Nine.

<sup>61</sup> *Fletcher’s Works*, Vol. V, p.440

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p.167.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 163 f.

<sup>64</sup> Chapter 3, *Christian Perfection: Wesley and Fletcher Compared*, p.138f.

<sup>65</sup> Matthew 19:21. According to Matthew Jesus responded to the young man, “If thou, desirest to be perfect...” and Wesley comments ‘That is, to be a real Christian’. *Notes*, p.40.

<sup>66</sup> Chapter 3 *Christian Perfection: Wesley and Fletcher compared*, p. 141, footnote 119.

<sup>67</sup> Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, p. 150

together, this implies, if it does not actually state, that *Christian Perfection* is really being understood as *Sinless Perfection*, albeit an attenuated version. It focuses on the words and phrases used by Wesley and Fletcher which point to some such finished state of sanctification or holiness. Granted there can be no denying that such words and phrases do exist but, having acknowledged this, due weight must also be given to the other words and phrases which present another picture. It will not do simply to dismiss these as some kind of rear guard action by Wesley and Fletcher to prop up the failed concept of *Christian Perfection*. They should be taken, rather, as part of the whole and seen as the complete expression of what Wesley and Fletcher really regarded as normal Christianity. This is not to deny that such statements can appear to be contradictory. But then, as has been demonstrated in First John, this tension is in the scriptures. Indeed, it is possible to charge the author of this Epistle on the one hand with perfectionism and on the other hand with antinomianism.<sup>68</sup> But, as with this Epistle, the essence of *Christian Perfection* is not 'perfection' or 'sinlessness' but Christian life as it could and ought to be: life in the Spirit. Believers should not have to live at the sub-normal level of what might be called 'half-Christians'.<sup>69</sup> In all six facets of Wesley's description of *Christian Perfection* this emphasis is abundantly clear.<sup>70</sup> The emphasis was on the 'all'! For Fletcher the 'fullness of the Spirit' made mediocrity and nominality in the life of the Christian inexcusable. Christians living in the age of the Spirit had all the resources necessary to make them overcomers. Both Fletcher and Wesley saw a New Testament Christianity of life in the Spirit which must be in no way inferior to previous dispensations. Here was

<sup>68</sup> Eaton, M., *1.2.3. John, Focus on the Bible*, [Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1996], p.98. Contrast 1 John 1: 8 with 1 John 3: 4-10.

<sup>69</sup> see for example: *Fletcher's Works*, Vol.VIII, p.304; *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p.367.

<sup>70</sup> Chapter 1, *Christian Perfection* - Wesley's exposition, pp.13 ff.



something which was much more than life in name only; here was a quality of life to be experienced by every believer, as his or her privilege and responsibility. Such a life would lift the believer out of the realm of the natural into the realm of the supernatural. As Fletcher stated:

"Nor do we think it 'shocking' to hear an adult believer say, 'The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law of innocence, or the letter of the Mosaic law, 'could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be' evangelically 'fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit'."<sup>71</sup>

To focus in on definitions excludes this broader picture and results in a total misunderstanding of what *Christian Perfection* was really all about, that is, what it means to be a 'real Christian'.

### **Christian Perfection: The Wesley/Fletcher 'category of interpretation' for the 'instantaneous' and the 'gradual'**

Assuming it is correct to suppose that *Christian Perfection* is not indeed a call to 'sinless perfection' but rather a call to 'walk in the Spirit' does this then mean that the difficulty of the 'instantaneous' has now be resolved? For instance, it might well be argued that 'walking in the Spirit' is much more in keeping with the gradual growth in holiness and therefore the stress on the moment can be quietly dropped. But this cannot be so if Methodism is to remain faithful to the Wesley/Fletcher emphasis. While historically, it is unquestionably true that Methodism (using this word in the broadest sense) has found the maintenance of this union extremely difficult, if not impossible, there can be no doubt that Wesley and Fletcher intended the marriage to remain. Yet, all too often, it has to be accepted that what Wesley and Fletcher intended, whether purposely or otherwise, has been

<sup>71</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 418.

disregarded or overlooked.

Often the conflict between the issues of the crisis and the process has been seen as irreconcilable, resulting in the rejection of the crisis in favour of the process. At other times the reverse has been the case with the emphasis on the process being swallowed up in the importance of the moment. Either way, seen on its own, is a denial of what Wesley and Fletcher really intended in the concept of *Christian Perfection*. Such one-sided approaches serve only to continue the false and distorted view of *Christian Perfection*, a view which in the end has always been thoroughly discredited. However, instead if both words can be seen as part of the totality of *Christian Perfection* then a different attitude will emerge. Instead of centring on either the 'instantaneous' or the 'gradual' as the only way of holiness both words will be seen as part of the same dynamic process of holiness, albeit different aspects of that process. As Newton, citing some of the positive things about *Christian Perfection*, has observed:

"The dynamic, open-ended view of the Christian life, and the optimistic estimate of the power of grace in human lives, gives a bracing view to the pilgrimage Christ's people are called to, and one in which to 'travel hopefully' is not played off against 'to arrive'."<sup>72</sup>

This way, not only the importance of the moment (whatever content the 'moment' contains) will be recognised but also the fact that the 'moment' is 'preceded and followed' by a gradual on-going process. Salvation will be seen for what it really is: a dynamic process reaching right out into eternity. There is no suggestion here of some plateau of achievement where the super believer can rest at ease. It is rather, to use the terminology of the existentialist philosophers, that the believer will always be a person 'en route, reaching for the future'. *Christian Perfection*, however 'the moment' is

<sup>72</sup> Newton, J.A., *Perfection and Spirituality in the Methodist Tradition*, *Church Quarterly*, October 1970, p.102.

to be defined, is not 'sinless perfection'.

Still, if this is true, the problem of defining the 'moment' must be resolved. Stressing the 'moment' leaves the difficulty of defining exactly what was happening in the 'moment' and how it is to be reconciled in a meaningful way with the process. Already it has been noted that the Wesley/Fletcher 'moment' has been most often interpreted in terms of some crisis of sanctification or holiness.<sup>73</sup> In the opinion of the writer, this interpretation runs completely counter to the Wesley/Fletcher emphasis of holding together the gradual and the instantaneous. If this clear emphasis in *Christian Perfection* is to be taken seriously, clearly, the 'moment' can never be defined solely in terms of sanctification or love or power or anything else. By qualifying this statement with the word solely the writer allows for the fact that sanctification, love and power may indeed flow out from the 'moment' but he believes they can never, in themselves, be regarded as the 'moment'. Wesley and Fletcher emphatically insisted that *Christian Perfection* as they understood it was always 'improvable'.<sup>74</sup> Yet, if *Christian Perfection* is to be defined primarily in terms of 'entire sanctification', this must be a nonsense. Equally nonsensical, as critics have often pointed out, is the notion that such sanctification can be lost. No doubt, it is difficult not to see *Christian Perfection* as 'perfect sanctification', when Wesley and Fletcher speak of it respectively in terms like 'entire sanctification'<sup>75</sup> and the 'removal of Belial's image'.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the broader picture exemplified in the stress on the gradual aspect of *Christian Perfection* as well as its crisis nature demands that it is seen differently. If instead of interpreting *Christian Perfection* through the framework of some finished state, as a term

<sup>73</sup> Chapter 4, *Christian Perfection: the problems examined*, pp. 175 ff.

<sup>74</sup> *Wesley Works*, Vol. XI, p. 442.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388 f

<sup>76</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 153.

like 'entire sanctification' suggests, it is seen through the framework of the synthesis of the gradual and the instantaneous, then a satisfactory understanding can be reached. The need is to maintain the proper balance between the crisis and the process and give a creditable explanation of the 'moment'.

With regard to balance, the eschatological tension already present within the New Testament itself offers a model. In the New Testament there is always the 'now' and the 'not yet' in the life of the Spirit. The Christian lives in the tension of being between the times. Moltmann graphically pictured this tension by suggesting that the Christian should not be seen as 'set at the high noon of life, but at the dawn of a new day at the point where night and day, things passing and things to come, grapple with each other'.<sup>77</sup> Here Moltmann observed the believer would not only know his or her faith being sustained by the hope of the things to come, but also, by the same hope, he or she would experience a transformation of his or her present living.<sup>78</sup> There will be times when the powers of 'the age to come' break through into the present age. That the believer would not be conscious of such moments is difficult to imagine. Though, of course (and perhaps more often), there will be the periods when such realities are no more than a hope. According to the New Testament, the realities of the 'age to come' are all effected by the one whom Jesus promised would be the agent of that world: the Holy Spirit. The writer to the Ephesians wrote: 'The Spirit is the guarantee that we shall receive what God has promised his people'.<sup>79</sup> This was not just something to be experienced in the future. In Greek the

<sup>77</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 31. While aware of the criticism that Moltmann's early theology (notably in this book) excluded experience of God, this writer considers Bauckham's view more correct, particularly in the light of Moltmann's most recent work, *The Spirit of Life*. For Bauckham's argument see: Bauckham R., *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, [Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1995], pp. 213-219

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.16

<sup>79</sup> Ephesians 1: 14.



word ἀρραβων, translated 'guarantee', means an advance payment, a deposit. This clearly indicates that the Spirit itself was the first instalment of the 'age to come'. Wesley referred to this as a 'foretaste' of what was to come.<sup>80</sup> While it was only a 'foretaste' the taste nevertheless must be real. There must be some conscious awareness of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Certainly there are references in the New Testament which suggest the believer will be conscious of the dimension of the 'age to come', albeit in tension. For example, through the Spirit the believer can in the here and now share in 'the glory of the Lord' as well as in the 'power of his resurrection'.<sup>81</sup> While such terms are not defined it would be difficult to deny that some conscious experience was not intended. Again, 'even though sin means death for mortal bodies, the indwelling Spirit means life both now and in the future'<sup>82</sup> because the Spirit also operates in his or her mortal body.<sup>83</sup> These references from the New Testament clearly illustrate the eschatological 'there and then' breaking through into the present 'here and now'.<sup>84</sup> But, of course, it is only a "breaking through", the believer still remains in the world of the 'not yet'. Despite the realities of the future world, the 'not yet' of the 'here and now' might be seen to act much as a jamming signal does, breaking up the incoming image and sound, with the result that the believer can at best only see 'dimly'.<sup>85</sup> This, is no doubt, why Paul in Romans, having already called the believer a 'son of God',<sup>86</sup> went on to refer to 'groaning inwardly while we wait for God to make us his sons and set our

<sup>80</sup> **Notes**, Ephesians 1: 14. p.295. see also: *The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law*, Sermon 34, **Wesley's Works**, (BE), Vol. II, p. 14 f.

<sup>81</sup> 2 Corinthians 3: 18; Philippians 3: 10

<sup>82</sup> Fee, **God's Empowering Presence**, p. 546

<sup>83</sup> Romans 8: 11

<sup>84</sup> Smail, **Reflected Glory**, p.123

<sup>85</sup> 2 Corinthians 4: 16 - 5: 1-5., 1 Corinthians 13: 12.

<sup>86</sup> Romans 8: 14,15,16,19

whole body free'.<sup>87</sup> Sons and yet still to be sons. Here is 'the tension of the already given and the still to come' a tension within which all Christians have to live.<sup>88</sup>

Contrary to Packer's opinion,<sup>89</sup> while Wesley did not use the term, 'eschatological tension', it must be said he was not unaware of the tension it implies.<sup>90</sup> This is surely just the sort of tension that is involved in the concepts of the 'instantaneous' and the 'gradual'. Put simply, the 'gradual' allows for the 'not yet' of the 'here and now' of remaining in a fallen body within a fallen world while the 'instantaneous' recognises the 'here and now' of the Spirit breaking through into the world of sense and time as in moments of crisis. This, of course, in no way denies that the gradual aspect of growth is not also the work of the Spirit. It must always be recognised that any diligent and effective use of the means of grace in the growth of the Christian are as much a result of the workings of the Spirit as are any numinous moments of crisis. As has been noted, Wesley and Fletcher both emphasised the importance of the gradual that preceded and followed the 'moment'.<sup>91</sup> Yet, at the same time there is the clear recognition that the Christian already belongs to the 'New age', a fact confirmed and made real by the Spirit within, and therefore will experience now the powers of the age to come. Again, as Moltmann has commented:

"The inner experience of the Holy Spirit is for Wesley more than a

<sup>87</sup> Romans 8: 23 *The New English Bible*, [Oxford/Cambridge University Press, 1970], p.199

<sup>88</sup> Smail, *Reflected Glory*, p.124

<sup>89</sup> Chapter 4, Christian Perfection: The problems examined, p.188f.

<sup>90</sup> Sanders comment is valid 'Had he lived now Wesley might have availed himself of the blessed word eschatological'. Sanders, P.S., *What God hath joined together*, in Is there a Neo-Wesleyanism? *Religion in Life*, Vol. XXIX 1959-60, p.500

<sup>91</sup> *Wesley Works*, Vol. XI, p. 374, 442; *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. V, p. 423. see this thesis: Chapter 3, Wesley and Fletcher Compared pp.114 f. A similar point could be said to be made when Fletcher refers to the words of Paul 'the working out of your own salvation... it is God that worketh in you'. Philippians 2: 12 c-13, quoted in, *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 171. Wesley similarly sees these words as meaning that God's 'influences' do 'not supersede but encourage our own efforts'. *Notes* p.306

hope and more than a beginning.”<sup>92</sup>

To illustrate what he means by this comment Moltmann immediately goes on to quote Wesley:

“It is termed the ‘kingdom of God’, because it is the immediate fruit of God’s reigning in the soul... It is called the ‘kingdom of heaven’, because it is (in degree) heaven opened in the soul.

Everlasting life is won,  
Glory is on earth begun.”<sup>93</sup>

‘Glory... on earth begun’ must be the breaking through of the ‘there and then’ of the Spirit bringing into the ‘here and now’ that which is more than a hope and more than a beginning.

### **Christian Perfection: The Wesley/Fletcher ‘category of interpretation’ for ‘actualisation’**

Of course, if the eschatological tension of the New Testament does offer some legitimate insight in understanding the Wesley/Fletcher synthesis of the ‘gradual’ and the ‘instantaneous’ then the difficulties of defining the “moment” should become easier to resolve. For if, having acknowledged that the life of the Christian is indeed one of life in the Spirit, it should not be surprising if special moments do occur. These moments must be attributable to the Spirit. The issue, however, is not so much that special moments occur but that any one moment should ever become a necessary stage in the Christian journey. Packer in criticising *Christian Perfection* stated:

“Had Wesley simply proclaimed that the Father and the Son do in fact from time to time make the loyal disciple conscious of their presence in a vivid, heart warming way and that through these visitations one may become immune for shorter or longer periods to previously besetting temptations and that all Christians should

<sup>92</sup> Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, p.332 n.11 Moltmann believes that Wesley saw *Christian Perfection* in the ultimate sense as realisable only in heaven. (Ibid., p.165) This certainly fits in with the argument of this thesis with regard to the balance between the ‘instantaneous’ and the ‘gradual’.

<sup>93</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, (BE) Vol. I, pp. 224, 581, 583

constantly be asking their Lord to draw near and bless them thus, no problem would exist, he would then have been speaking uncontroversially about undisputed realities of life in the Spirit.<sup>94</sup>

Here Packer even allows that in such moments it is possible in the life of the Spirit to live above temptation.<sup>95</sup> But the real issue, as far as Packer was concerned, was that any such moment should ever be construed as a doctrinal norm making it a distinct and necessary 'moment' in the pilgrimage of the Christian. Immediately this happens it can only be seen as Christianity plus something. Moving the emphasis then, from seeing *Christian Perfection* in terms of 'perfection' and 'sinlessness' to seeing it as being the 'category of interpretation' for Life in the Spirit and what real Christianity was all about, does not avoid this difficulty if the crisis is still recognised. To insist on the crisis is to make one 'moment' more special than another. In the last chapter it was suggested that the Pentecostal/Charismatic framework might offer some insight.

Arguably the emphasis in the Pentecostal/Charismatic<sup>96</sup> thinking on the importance of the 'baptism with the Spirit' does not initially look very promising. Seen in general terms the phrase 'baptism with the Spirit' might reasonably be regarded as in keeping with a description of Christianity as life in the Spirit. When, however, it is expressed in terms of a necessary experience to be sought after, as in Pentecostal/Charismatic circles, it can no longer be regarded as simply one moment among many. In other words

<sup>94</sup> Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p.137.

<sup>95</sup> In the opinion of the present writer this reinforces the point that *Christian Perfection* continues to be seen in terms of 'Sinless Perfection'. There is no way that Wesley or Fletcher would have on any permanent basis regarded the Christian free from temptation. Temptation, of course, was not sin.

<sup>96</sup> The present writer uses this term to refer to Classical Pentecostalism, its primary beginnings in 1901 at Azusa Street, Los Angeles, resulting in the establishment of Pentecostal denominations. He also uses it to refer to the Charismatic Movement, its beginnings occurring within the main line denominations in the 1950s. Of course since 1965 the movement has had a rapid expansion by many others coming from outside of the mainline denominations. Barrett, D., *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, p. 820



'a moment' becomes 'the moment'. Or, as the present Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, once described it, it becomes the 'two-stage nonsense about receiving Jesus at conversion and then receiving the baptism of the Spirit later'.<sup>97</sup> Then it surely can only be dismissed on the grounds of being theologically incorrect. The shift of emphasis, therefore, from a 'gift of holiness', the commonly perceived view of *Christian Perfection* in general and of the 'moment' of crisis in particular, to one of 'baptism with the Spirit' does not save such a 'moment' from being categorised in terms of a post-conversion blessing and deserving of rejection on that basis.

However, as the Church (George Carey too!) of the 20th Century has discovered, the impact of the Pentecostal/Charismatic phenomenon, with its emphasis on the experience of 'baptism with the Spirit', cannot be quite so summarily dismissed. It is a fact that the Pentecostal/Charismatic grouping whose most distinct aspect of theology this is, presently represents some 21 percent of organised global Christianity and supplies around 25 percent of the world's full-time Christian workers.<sup>98</sup> While statistics can never prove the doctrinal authenticity of the Pentecostal/Charismatic theology of 'the baptism with the Spirit' they do at least add weight to the ongoing challenge from the new churches to those in the 'main-line' denominations to look afresh with critical eyes at the place they give to the Holy Spirit in doctrine and experience'.<sup>99</sup> There is an abundance of literature which demonstrates that theologians of main stream Christianity have been forced to consider the possibility that, at the very least, the Pentecostal/Charismatic phenomenon might be a reminder of something too long forgotten or even

<sup>97</sup> Carey, G., *The Church in the Market Place*, [Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1984], p.8

<sup>98</sup> See: Barrett, in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, pp. 810, 830

<sup>99</sup> Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p.viii

repressed by main-line denominations. As Hocken, a Catholic theologian, observes the perceived picture of main-line churches, by those in the new Spirit-baptism orientated churches, as:

“dwindling and ageing congregations, that have no visible impact on the surrounding society, that do not evangelise, whose members do not love one another, that are resistant to change, that uphold a view of themselves and their importance that is not borne out by visible evidence”.<sup>100</sup>

while an over-simplification is ‘not so far removed from reality as to be a total misrepresentation.’<sup>101</sup> The something ‘long forgotten’ is, of course, the fact that Christian life is indeed one of life in the Spirit and therefore, by its very nature, ought to display clear signs of the Spirit’s ‘transforming and invigorating energy’.<sup>102</sup> It would appear that the Spirit has been domesticated by intellectualism or sacramentalism or institutionalism or maybe all three.

However, while this may all indeed be true, it does not resolve the difficulty of making one ‘moment’ into the ‘moment’. To accept that the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement has brought to the Church at large a fresh awareness of Christian life as one of life in the Spirit is one thing. To link this awareness with a specific experience called the ‘baptism with the Spirit’ is quite another. From the biblical view, as Dunn has shown, there is nothing at all wrong with the focus of attention on the experience of the Spirit stressed by the Pentecostals. Clearly, such a focus is justified by the evidence of the New Testament. Indeed, as Dunn states:

“That the Spirit, and particularly the gift of the Spirit, was *a fact of experience* in the lives of the earliest Christians has been too

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<sup>100</sup> Hocken, *The Glory and the Shame*, p. 170

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Heron, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 131

obvious to require elaboration".<sup>103</sup>

Without question the nature of Spirit-baptism in the New Testament is portrayed as 'a very definite and often dramatic experience'.<sup>104</sup> It is both 'dynamic and experiential'.<sup>105</sup> But as already has been noted, this does not mean that such awareness comes subsequent to conversion. In Dunn's understanding the experiential event called 'baptism with the Spirit' takes place at conversion. It is indeed the key 'element' of conversion itself. This, as Dunn observes, certainly raises large and important questions for present-day Christianity. Not least of these questions must be the matter of how to classify those who regard themselves as Christians but who would not claim to have received such a Pentecostal experience. Indeed, they might well regard all such experience as 'enthusiasm'. Logically, it would seem that those who are unable to claim such a definite experience cannot be considered as real Christians. But this must surely be unacceptable, placing as it does an over-emphasis on the subjective and resulting in de-Christianising huge numbers of people. The alternative might be to reject the New Testament picture as a truly normative picture of what a Christian really is. This, however, would introduce new difficulties about the authority of the New Testament itself. In the opinion of the present writer there is another option.

While the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement has been and continues to be a challenge to the rest of Christendom, it, in itself, has not been immune from the questions raised by the rest of Christendom regarding its theological correctness. Within the movement and outside of it, a debate

<sup>103</sup> Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 225. Dunn notes a number of N.T. references to substantiate this point. They are as follows: Acts 2: 4; 4: 31; 9: 31; 10: 44-46; 13: 52; 19: 6; Romans 5: 5; 8: 1-16; 1 Corinthians 12: 7,13; 2 Corinthians 3: 6; 5: 5; Galatians 4: 6; 5: 16-18, 25; 1 Thessalonians 1: 5 f.; Titus 3: 6; John 3: 8; 4: 14; 7: 38 f.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p.4

has gone on as to how the experience called the 'baptism with the Spirit' should find theological expression in the whole scheme of salvation. Broadly speaking there are three views<sup>106</sup> with regard to how the 'baptism with the Spirit' fits into the whole scheme of salvation:

- New birth and the baptism with the Spirit occur simultaneously.
- New birth and baptism with the Spirit are two stages in Christian initiation and occur separately.
- New birth and the baptism with the Spirit (in the strict sense of the term) occur simultaneously but the latter has an experiential dimension compatible with the charismatic experience and the biblical "filling with the Spirit" which, although terminologically inexact sometimes, is described as 'baptism with the Spirit'.

According to the first view all believers at conversion are baptised with the Spirit and what the Pentecostal/Charismatic grouping calls being baptised with the Spirit really belongs to conversion. There is a considerable weight of exegetical detail to support this view.<sup>107</sup> Apart from the questions already noted in relation to Dunn the practical realities of such a stance have been well expressed by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), for thirty years a popular preacher and minister of Westminster Chapel, London, who wrote:

"There is nothing, I am convinced, that so quenches the Spirit as the teaching which identifies the baptism of the Holy Spirit with regeneration. But it is a very commonly held teaching today, indeed it has been the popular view for many years. They say

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<sup>106</sup> Of course there are variations within these categories. Michael Eaton, for example, sees nine different viewpoints which can be put under two different categories either a non-experiential event or an experience. See: Eaton, M.A., *Baptism with the Spirit: the teaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, pp.18-21

<sup>107</sup> See for example: Stott, J., *The Baptism and Fullness of the Spirit*, [London:InterVarsity Press, 1964]; Dunn, *The Baptism in the Holy Spirit*; Green, M., *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, [London: Hodder&Stoughton, 1975]. Dunn's view, of course, is not strictly speaking the same as the others. With him 'the baptism with the Spirit' not only occurs at conversion but occurs as a definite experience. The others accept that 'baptism with the Spirit' occurs at conversion but is not seen as a definite experience in the sense of being 'experiential'.



that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is 'non-experimental', that it happens to everybody at regeneration. So we say, 'Ah well, I am already baptised with the Spirit, it happened when I was born again, it happened at my conversion; there is nothing for me to seek, I have got it all.' Got it all? Well, if you have got it all, I simply ask, in the name of God, why are you as you are? If you have got it all, why are you so unlike New Testament Christians? Got it all! Got it all at your conversion! Well, where is it I ask?"<sup>108</sup>

While the the style is that of the preacher, the point is well made for it is just such a discrepancy which can create within the contemporary Christian the desire for something more. The existence of the Pentecostal/Charismatic phenomenon is evidence that there is at the very least a problem within main-line Christianity. As Taylor observes:

"The longing of thousands of Christians to recover what they feel instinctively their faith promises them is what underlies the whole movement."<sup>109</sup>

Tugwell's comment that it 'has come in protest against Christianity minus' is certainly worthy of notice.<sup>110</sup>

The problem of 'subsequence' in the second view, of course, has already been explored. It is seen as adding a further necessary 'work of grace' as well as creating in the process first and second class Christians.

The third view is the result of the continued reflection on the difficulties associated with the Pentecostal/Charismatic terminology. It accepts that the term 'baptism', strictly speaking, links in with Christian initiation and, in that sense, every Christian has already been baptised with the Spirit. But, having acknowledged this, it also recognises the validity of the charismatic experience and seeks to express this experience with greater theological precision. There can be no question that salvation is complete in Christ from

<sup>108</sup> quoted in: Graham, J., *The Giant Awakes*, [London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982], p.55 f. Experimental is being used here in the sense of experiential

<sup>109</sup> Taylor, *The Go-between God*, p.199.

<sup>110</sup> Tugwell, S., *Did you Receive the Spirit?*, [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972], p.83

the beginning of the Christian life. The 'two stage' version of Christianity is very definitely out. This, however, does not mean that every Christian will immediately experience this completeness available in Christ at conversion. As Torrance states:

"The objective union which we have with Christ through his incarnational assumption of our humanity into himself is subjectively actualised in us through his indwelling spirit, we in Christ and Christ in us thus complementing and interpenetrating each other."<sup>111</sup>

At a practical level such an 'actualisation' must belong to the on-going process of development within time and space. The objective reality of an individual's justification may not co-incide with his or her realisation of such a reality. It is Taylor who has observed that while 'every Christian is meant to possess (his or her) possessions' yet 'many never do'.<sup>112</sup> In practice, therefore, what is indeed true objectively may not always be true in experience. The Galatian Christians had begun in the Spirit all right but they apparently had subsequently floundered because, according to Paul, they had attempted to go forward in their own fleshly power. There just was no way in which they could travel on the supernatural pathway in the strength of the natural. This did not mean they had ceased to be Christians or that some 'second work of grace' would have to be added before they could be fully Christian. Rather, to use Torrance's word, there was a problem in the 'actualisation'. They had failed to 'possess their possessions' and appropriate the Spirit's empowerment for their on-going Christian lives. While they may have been aware of this truth in an objective sense, subjectively it seems it had failed to become an on-going reality for them. Hence, Paul reminds them that they had come to life by the Spirit

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<sup>111</sup> Torrance, T.F., *The Mediation of Christ*, [Exeter: Paternoster, 1983], p.77

<sup>112</sup> Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, p. 112

they should also 'walk by the Spirit'.<sup>113</sup> It is at this 'experiential' level where the third view in understanding 'baptism with the Spirit' places its emphasis. So, for example, David Watson (1933-1984), the Anglican charismatic leader, while quite readily accepting that the 'baptism with the Spirit' occurs at conversion, attempted to explain any subsequent charismatic experience as a release of the latent potential of the 'baptism with the Spirit'. Watson stated:

"It is possible to think of the overwhelming of the Spirit as something entirely separate from Christian initiation, whereas the two, ideally and potentially, though not necessarily experientially, are one. On the other hand, it is possible so to stress that the Christian has got it all by being baptised into Christ that the overwhelming of the Spirit is never experienced".<sup>114</sup>

The experiential aspect is the common thread within this approach. Cardinal Suenens, writing from the Catholic perspective, referred to the charismatic experience as a 'release of the latent potentials of the Spirit'.<sup>115</sup> Sullivan, from the same perspective, argued that the 'baptism with the Spirit' has two aspects, the theological and the experiential.<sup>116</sup> In the light of this approach the 'moment', instead of being seen in terms of completion or as a necessary something added to the work of salvation, is seen more in terms of belonging to what might be described as the 'experiential dimension of the life of faith'. Of course, for some the issue of 'subsequence' will still be a problem. The fact that the Christian has an experience subsequent to conversion which, although described in terms of being a release of the potential of the 'baptism with the Spirit' effected at his or her conversion, still has overtones of a 'second work of grace'. This, however, could be more influenced by doctrinal dogmatism and a fear of 'enthusiasm'

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<sup>113</sup> Galatians 5: 25

<sup>114</sup> Watson, D.C.K., *One in the Spirit*, [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973], p. 69

<sup>115</sup> Suenens, L.J., *A New Pentecost?*, [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975], p. 81

<sup>116</sup> Sullivan, F.A., *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal*, [Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982], pp. 66-70

than an objective appraisal of what is being claimed. While it is true that the experiential aspect of the Spirit has been and can be presented as a necessary post-conversion blessing, it need not be so. Logically it is, of course, true that all experience which follows conversion is 'subsequent' but no one would deny that experience in the life of the believer. The difficulty arises if there is an objective aspect to the experience, only then can it properly be seen as a 'second work of grace'. But those who emphasise the experiential aspect of the 'baptism with the Spirit' very definitely do not see in it a new objective "work of grace" added to the work of Christ. Rather what they see is that which has been objectively true for the person in Christ all along has now become subjective reality thus making the believer consciously aware of the 'baptism with the Spirit'. Nothing additional has been done for that believer's salvation which has not been done for any other believer. He or she has simply discovered the experiential reality of living in the realm of the Spirit. That such a realisation can have an identifiable point in time is understandable. The mere awareness of what is objectively true must in itself be a transforming event of which one cannot be oblivious. But this in no sense is seen as a 'second work of grace'. It is nothing other than the 'actualisation' of the 'experiential dimension of the life of faith'.

Jean-Jacques Suurmond, a Reformed minister in the Netherlands writing from the Charismatic perspective, argued that this phrase does indeed offer a reasonable context for the 'moment' called 'the baptism with the Spirit'.<sup>117</sup> Suurmond using Henry Lederle's work,<sup>118</sup> a survey of the most important interpretations of the baptism with the Spirit within the

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<sup>117</sup> Suurmond, J. J., *Word and Spirit at Play*, [London: S.C.M., English Translation., 1994], p.221 f.

<sup>118</sup> Lederle, H. I., *Treasures Old and New. Interpretations of Spirit Baptism in the Charismatic Renewal Movement*, [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1988]



Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, distinguished three main approaches to the 'moment' called the 'baptism with the Spirit'. These he identified as:

The Pentecostal Approach  
The Sacramental Approach  
The Critical Organic Approach.<sup>119</sup>

The Pentecostal approach is defined by its insistence on the 'baptism of the Spirit' as a distinct experience subsequent to conversion and confirmed by 'speaking in tongues'. Suurmond is in agreement with what already has been recognised as the major difficulty of this approach, i.e. 'a two-stage salvation'. By forcing a false dichotomy in the unity of the Spirit's work, it has created the erroneous and damaging notion of first and second class Christians.

But, as Suurmond believed, that criticism to some extent can also be levelled at the sacramental approach. It also has a two-phase structure, albeit brought in by the liturgical back door! In it, water-baptism pointed to rebirth/conversion and confirmation/confession pointed to the baptism with the Spirit. Within this structure it can be argued that the two stages are very much part of the natural progression of the whole process of salvation and that every believer was included unless he or she had chosen to do otherwise. Nevertheless, in Suurmond's opinion, the problem for both of these approaches was that they attempted to tie the 'incomprehensible ruach' to a fixed pattern. Biblical considerations apart, Suurmond maintained this did not allow for the many opportunities of serendipity which would come to the Christian who lived in the life of the Spirit.<sup>120</sup>

What was required, therefore, was an alternative which recognised the importance of the 'charismatic moment' but at the same time gave no encouragement to any theology of subsequence. There are echoes here of

<sup>119</sup> Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play*, p. 99

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p.100

the Wesley/Fletcher emphasis on the 'instantaneous' and the 'gradual'! According to Suurmond, this alternative could be found in the third approach, an approach which he called the 'critical-organic'. Here, instead of locking the baptism of the Spirit into a fixed and closely defined pattern of experience, such as the Pentecostal or the Sacramental experience, it becomes much more part of an organic whole. Furthermore, in adopting a critical approach, it can be free from any 'fundamentalist exterior'<sup>121</sup> which might belong to the Pentecostal approach, in particular. Suurmond elaborated on the 'critical-organic' approach by using the phrase 'baptism with the Word and Spirit'.<sup>122</sup> In this phrase the Word and the Spirit are seen together in a 'playful creative dynamic'. The Word represented order, as displayed for example in the scriptures and the sacraments, whereas the Spirit provided the dynamism and interchange, which made the people of God come alive. He picked up the common criticism that in the past the Church has all too often emphasised the Word at the expense of the Spirit.<sup>123</sup> This failure to acknowledge the experiential dimension of the Spirit had meant that the 'information' of the Word could not be personally significant to anyone, let alone encourage or change them.<sup>124</sup> This had been true both at the individual and the corporate level. However, in the 'playful'

<sup>121</sup> Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play*, p.150

<sup>122</sup> Taking the words about Jesus baptising 'with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Luke 3: 15f) Suurmond argues that John the Baptist was thinking here of the liberating presence of God's Word and Spirit. Ibid., p.105. Both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament he points to the importance of God rescuing his people by the Word and Spirit. Ibid., pp. 101-112; 133-144. He also cites Simeon, "the New Theologian", as well as Calvin as being in his support. Ibid., p.144 f.

<sup>123</sup> There are definite echoes here with Bishop Newbigin's highly influential work. See Newbigin, L., *The Household of God*, [London: S.C.M., 1953; second edition, 1964]. Newbigin identifies three broad forms of ecclesiology: the sacramental, represented in Roman Catholicism; the Word represented in traditional Protestantism; the Spirit represented in Pentecostalism. All three had a contribution to make to the complete understanding of the Church. The absence of any one of the three emphasises would mean a defective Church. Newbigin particularly calls for a fresh appreciation of the Spirit. The Church should be seen as a living fellowship filled and guided by the Spirit.

<sup>124</sup> Suurmond, p.144.

dynamic of the 'baptism of the Word and Spirit', Suurmond believed the 'experiential dimension' would be restored and faith, which would otherwise have remained 'abstract and powerless', would be made to live. Again, a parallel might be drawn with the Wesley/Fletcher stress on a living vibrant Christianity as opposed to existing on something below the New Testament standard.

Conversion, according to Suurmond, was the first significant moment of crisis. Here, for the first time, the person became aware of the 'experiential dimension of faith'. In this moment of crisis he or she encountered the living God within the creative dynamic of the 'baptism of the Word and Spirit'. It is worthy of note that Fletcher saw the 'baptism with the Spirit' as applicable to the moment of conversion. Of course, Suurmond pointed out that the conversion experience was not the end of the story. The 'baptism', therefore, was not just confined to one 'moment' of crisis. Subsequent to conversion, the experiential dimension continued to manifest itself in numerous new experiences.<sup>125</sup> As Suurmond saw it, the scriptural foundation for these "countless charisms"<sup>126</sup> could be found in such words as 'Be filled with the Spirit'.<sup>127</sup> However, while there were indeed these 'moments' of crisis, Suurmond emphasised that such 'moments' did not just 'drop from the sky'. They also belonged to the creative dynamic of the Word and Spirit worked out in the individual within the community of faith.<sup>128</sup> 'Moments' there were but, as Wesley and Fletcher stressed, these would always be preceded and followed by a gradual work which was also a work of the Spirit.<sup>129</sup>

In this connection it is worth noting, at least from the perspective of this

<sup>125</sup> Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play*, p.145

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p.222

<sup>127</sup> Acts 2: 4; Acts 9: 17; Ephesians 5: 18

<sup>128</sup> Suurmond, p.182

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 145

thesis, that Suurmond (using the the insights of traditional spirituality to get a better grasp of the Pentecostal experience)<sup>130</sup> pointed out that after the joy of the 'moment' there followed:

"a period of struggle and new seeking in which a person becomes aware of his or her own inability to offer resistance to the compulsion of the false self. The need for 'power' to lead the new life increases. It is no new observation that many members of the established churches get stuck at this stage (if they ever get this far)."<sup>131</sup>

The failure of this phase, in Suurmond's opinion, was, in no small measure, due to a failure in teaching. The believer had never been taught that 'the way with God goes further'.<sup>132</sup> That was why the believer, when coming into contact with such teaching, may express puzzlement as to why he or she had never heard of it before. Certainly, from the Wesley/Fletcher perspective, the failure to teach about the concept of *Christian Perfection* was regarded as a cause of weak Christians. For the mystic (Suurmond's traditional spirituality) this search ended, often in a moment, with an experience identified in mystical terminology as illumination. Here the mystic discovered a new sense of joy and peace accompanied with an increased desire for communication with God, 'the great Beloved'. There was a heightened awareness of spiritual realities all around, both good and evil. And alongside this, contrary to the commonly perceived image of the mystic, he or she became energetically involved with service in the world, using both natural and supernatural gifts. As Suurmond observed, this whole process could be seen as characteristic of the process in

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<sup>130</sup> Suurmond here seeks to use the insights of Mysticism, supplied from a study based on the classic work by Evelyn Underhill (Underhill, E., *Mysticism: A study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness*, [London: Methuen, 1911, reprinted 1960] ) to give fresh understanding to the Pentecostal experience. The study is: Steggink, O., and Waaijman, K., *Spiritualiteit en Mystiek*, [Nijmegen: Gottmer, 1985] Vol. I, p. p. 79-108

<sup>131</sup> Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play*, p.157

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.



Pentecostalism.<sup>133</sup> It might be added and also of Methodism! The Pentecostal often described the results of his or her experience of 'baptism in the spirit' in terms of new dimensions of praise and prayer, worship and service. Such an experience comes after a search for spiritual reality. The difference, of course, for the Pentecostal was that, while there most certainly will be further 'infillings' of the Spirit, only one experience could be properly referred to as the 'baptism with the Spirit'. In contrast, the mystic has yet further phases to discover, indeed not even the last phase, 'union', could be considered as the end of the mystical way. This might be paralleled with the Wesley/Fletcher emphasis of the 'gradual' and the 'instantaneous'. But how does this really help in understanding the 'moment'?

At the least, it offers confirmation from experience that such 'charismatic moments' do occur. The parallels which can be drawn from the search by the Mystic, the Pentecostal and the Methodist for what can only be called the spiritual reality of an encounter with God are obvious. That such encounters have identifiable 'moments' seems clear. This, of course, does not mean that there are grounds for arguing for the necessity of such stages nor for their doctrinal importance. In Wesley and Fletcher the initial encounter with God, the subsequent period of struggle, the appropriate teaching resulting in the discovery of a new experiential dimension of living which goes on developing, are all clearly identifiable.<sup>134</sup> But Wesley himself qualified his outline of the work of God in salvation by saying, '...how God may work we cannot tell; but the general manner wherein he does work is this...'.<sup>135</sup> What may be generally observed about the workings of the Almighty must not always be made into a doctrine, for God, by his very nature, cannot be limited to one particular pattern. A similar point can be

<sup>133</sup> Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play*, p. 158

<sup>134</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 378 ff., *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p.168 ff.

<sup>135</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 380

seen in Fletcher when he acknowledged more than one 'baptism of the Spirit' and quoted approvingly from Wesley, again in regard to the process of God's work of salvation.<sup>136</sup> Accepting that such 'moments' do occur does not mean that the process of salvation must be tied to fixed stages ( be that the two stages as some see in Methodism and its spiritual heirs or even in five stages if the various stages of the mystical way are to be considered). Recognition of 'moments' suggests rather that it is important to be open to the limitless grace of God and even pastorally sensitive to the individual Christian within his or her own faith community. No doubt, in this approach there is the danger that pastoral accommodation may be turned into doctrinal tenet. But then this must always be a possibility when seeking to establish the doctrinal 'hedge' for Christian experience.

The present writer believes it is wide of the mark to interpret *Christian Perfection* in those familiar static terms of 'sinlessness' or 'instantaneous' holiness. *Christian Perfection* was a 'category of interpretation' used by Wesley and Fletcher to portray life in the Spirit. Both men rejected the idea that the Christian was condemned to the inevitability of a constant struggle with wilful sin until he or she went to heaven. They believed New Testament Christianity offered something better. This was nothing other than the fullness of the life of the future (i.e.Spirit-filled life) in the present. For all of its difficulties the notion of Christian Perfection was the Wesley/Fletcher presentation of just such a reality. Seen as such, the present writer believes it will have implications which should impact on today's world. These implications are the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>136</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. VI, p. 167 f. Fletcher's quotation from Wesley is as follows: "...God usually gives a considerable time for men to receive light, to grow in grace, to do and suffer his will, before they are either justified or sanctified. But he does not invariably adhere to this sometimes he cuts short the work..." quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 168

## Chapter 6 Christian Perfection - Implications for Today

### Introduction

Given the concern of Wesley and Fletcher for living vibrant Christianity and their intention that *Christian Perfection* should encapsulate this, the business of this chapter will be to suggest some possible implications of such a Christianity with regard to the individual and to society and with particular reference to Northern Ireland. If the Wesley/Fletcher concept of *Christian Perfection* is really about living out the life of the future in the present by the power of the Spirit then the religio-political problem within Ireland provides it with its sternest challenge. The challenge is: to provide a resource which will enable a people who are deeply divided, religiously and politically, to be fully Christian. It is the belief of the present writer that this is what is at the heart of the Wesley/Fletcher concept of Christian Perfection. The task is to apply it.

Henry Rack has already pointed out that one of Wesley's problems in terms of *Christian Perfection* was his failure to develop 'a doctrine of applied *Christian Perfection*'.<sup>1</sup> It might be argued that this was so simply because it could not be done. It is, however, the conviction of the present writer that were such an applied doctrine to be developed, it would have important implications in at least three areas:

A balanced Spirituality

A wholesome Ecumenism

A radical-social Transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p.369

## A balanced Spirituality

The discussion of Spirituality has certainly become fashionable in the Nineties but the difficulty is defining exactly what is meant by the word. Such difficulty of definition, no doubt, lies in the fact that the spiritual life is in itself complex because it involves not just the specifically Christian but also the non-Christian.<sup>2</sup> For Christian Spirituality, at least, Albin offers a useful framework through which some grasp of the topic might be achieved. He cites four factors which together might be used to provide a basic pattern for probing the fabric of any given Spirituality.<sup>3</sup> They are:

Doctrine

Discipline

Liturgy

Life

Doctrine is seen in terms of what the given spirituality believes about the self, others, the world and the supernatural. Discipline refers to the source or sources of authority, the structure of corporate life and the consequences of deviant behaviour. Liturgy is, of course, the corporate life of worship and praise, which in Albin's opinion should impact upon the worshippers' attitudes, actions and way of life. Life entails the individual's lifestyle in a broader sense. In mind here is not just the believer's prayer life, study and devotion but also his or her work, leisure and involvement with society.

Summarising these aspects, the core truth about spirituality could be succinctly and accurately described as having to do with the character and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Hindu or Islamic Spirituality is as legitimate a use of the word as Anglican Spirituality or Evangelical Spirituality. Again within the caring professions the word spiritual is used without a specifically Christian connotation.

<sup>3</sup> Albin, T.R., *Spirituality*, in ***New Dictionary of Theology***, pp.656-658



quality of our life: with God, among fellow Christians, in the world.<sup>4</sup> For the Christian Church in general and the Methodist Church in particular about to go into a New Millennium, there can be few other concerns as important as this one. *Christian Perfection* in its wholeness is precisely about these things. It is fundamentally concerned about the 'shaping, empowering and maturing of the spiritual person'.<sup>5</sup>

However, if *Christian Perfection* continues to be interpreted purely in terms of some very wooden notion of sanctification, it will go on being rejected, and only espoused and defended by those whom Rupp once described as equating 'Scriptural holiness with fundamentalist piety'.<sup>6</sup> This will simply mean that part, at least, of the wealthy deposit of spirituality seen by Wesley and Fletcher as 'Scriptural Christianity' will have been lost. Without question the Spirituality of Wesley and Fletcher contained the space to allow the individual believer to appropriate experientially what was always available potentially. The concept of *Christian Perfection* included that which could be seen as a crisis aspect. Yet as Davies has observed, on the pathway of faith there may be a part of that journey 'experienced in consciousness and expressed to the world as an arrival at a certain point'.<sup>7</sup> This was no strange thing. Here was a pastoral device<sup>8</sup> which could allow the believer the time and space to come to recognise the conscious on-going reality of the fullness of life in the Spirit. It was not a necessary something added to the 'great salvation', it was rather part of the whole.

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<sup>4</sup> Banks, R.M., *Home Churches and Spirituality*, *Interchange*, No. 40, 1986, p.15

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, A., *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993], p.129

<sup>6</sup> Rupp, E.G., *Methodism in the Protestant Tradition*, [London: Epworth Press 1951], p. 26, quoted in Wakefield, G.S., *Methodist Devotion: The Spiritual Life in the Methodist Tradition 1791-1945*, [London: Epworth Press, 1966], p.112

<sup>7</sup> Davies, R., *The people called Methodists: Our Doctrines*, *H.M.C.G.B.* Vol. 1, p.173

<sup>8</sup> In conversation with the Rev. Dr William J. Abraham, he made a similar point by suggesting that perhaps Wesley regarded the the crisis aspect of *Christian Perfection* as a psychological necessity.

Some might want to argue that this is simply the result of inadequate teaching by the Church on life in the Spirit. There is, no doubt, truth in this, for as Grossman observes, if in a somewhat cavalier way, the expectation of a 'concrete experience' of the Spirit has been lost in almost all the churches, in spite of being so well attested in the New Testament'.<sup>9</sup> But while there may have been a failure in teaching, this can only be part of the problem. As in the physical sense the human personality generally requires time and space to develop into mature adulthood, this is also true in the spiritual realm. Within the concept of *Christian Perfection*, Methodist Spirituality offers the space for just such a development.

*Christian Perfection* was, of course, more than a crisis and here those aspects of spirituality identified by Albin as discipline, liturgy and life come into play. In Wesley/Fletcher terms discipline meant discipleship and was seen to be worked out in the means of grace. As one contemporary Wesleyan scholar confesses 'the degree to which *Christian Perfection* for Wesley actually meant discipleship not just an interior work of grace in the believer' is striking.<sup>10</sup> This was a connection which later Wesleyan thought and practice failed to maintain;<sup>11</sup> a failure which in no small measure has contributed to the continuing misunderstanding of the basic thrust of *Christian Perfection*. But to Wesley and Fletcher this connection was clear. Vibrant, living Christianity as encapsulated in the terms *Christian Perfection* required the means through which God's grace would continue to flow. All who would know the grace of God should wait for it through the means he has ordained.<sup>12</sup> Wesley defined the 'means of grace' in terms of 'works of

<sup>9</sup> Grossmann, S., *Stewards of God's Grace*, [Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1981 English Translation], p. 79

<sup>10</sup> Snyder, H.A., *The Radical Wesley*, [Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1980], p. 118

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 1, p.303.

piety' and 'works of mercy'.<sup>13</sup> The former he described as, the instituted 'means of grace' and the latter the prudential or variable 'means of grace'. The instituted 'means of grace' were: prayer, scripture, the Lord's Supper, fasting and the church.<sup>14</sup> The importance of all five can be clearly discerned in the documents studied in relation to *Christian Perfection*. Special notice should be given with regard to the last, the church. Wesley saw the Church as the divinely intended place for Christ's followers to 'more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers and good works'.<sup>15</sup> He felt, however, that such 'provision for spiritual personal fellowship between individual believers'<sup>16</sup> was sadly lacking in his day. Of his own Church, the Church of England, he wrote:

"Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised or exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone is Christian fellowship: But, alas! where is it to be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please: Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather are not the bulk of parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian Connexion is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching over each other's souls? What bearing of one and other's burdens?"<sup>17</sup>

He was firmly convinced of the need for the individual believer to experience 'mutual encouragement, mutual examination, and mutual service'<sup>18</sup> at a level which was much higher than the 'great congregation' could ever provide. He, therefore, devised the structures for which Methodism is now renowned, the structures of societies, classes and bands. One account of Wesleyan Methodism in the mid-nineteenth century

<sup>13</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 1, pp. 376-97, 566-67, 593-594; Vol 3, pp. 313, 385.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol 3, p. 313 f.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Simon, J.S., *John Wesley and the Religious Societies*, [London: Epworth Press, 1921], 157

<sup>17</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. VIII, pp 251-252

<sup>18</sup> Williams, C., *John Wesley's Theology Today*, p.151

suggests that the significance and importance of such structures had not been missed by everyone. The account acknowledges, albeit grudgingly, that:

“...what with class meetings, and prayer meetings and preachings, Wesleyans have so much more means than Church people”.<sup>19</sup>

With these structures in place Wesley could quite justifiably argue that the spiritual fellowship characteristic of the early church had been reintroduced where it had been ‘utterly destroyed’. In Wesley’s opinion this had resulted, individually and corporately, in “peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work”.<sup>20</sup> This was no ‘merely nominal Christianity’ but nothing other than ‘pure and holy religion’<sup>21</sup> as God had intended it to be. This was encapsulated in the concept of *Christian Perfection*. Today its implications must be clear: if Christianity is to be living, vibrant and real then the means of such an experience of grace cannot be neglected. McGrath, in an appeal to Evangelicals to focus on the subject of Spirituality, warns that if there is a long term threat to the future of Evangelicalism ‘it may well be its lack of attention to spirituality’.<sup>22</sup> Clearly in Wesley and Fletcher the discipline of Christian Perfection is carefully spelt out in their concern for the long term future of scriptural Christianity. Of course, within these structures that other aspect of spirituality identified by Albin as liturgy can also be seen; as for example, in Wesley’s hymns, the love feast or even in the Rules set for the Bands.<sup>23</sup> It would be true to say that the spirituality of the societies depended on the sacramental life and liturgy of the worshipping church.<sup>24</sup> Here is a

<sup>19</sup> Greenwell, D., *Two Friends*, [London, 1952], p. 92

<sup>20</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, (Jackson) Vol. VIII, p. 252

<sup>21</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, (BE), Vol. 2, 59- 60

<sup>22</sup> McGrath, A., *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, p. 141

<sup>23</sup> In the Bands there were a list of rules which must have resulted in a form of liturgy, albeit a simple one, for the Rules see *Wesley’s Works*, (Jackson) Vol. VIII, pp. 272-275

<sup>24</sup> Whaling, *John and Charles Wesley*, p. 63



balanced spirituality.

The 'works of mercy' can be equated with that aspect of spirituality called 'life'. According to Wesley, the details of these could change with different circumstances but they were broadly defined under three headings: doing no harm, doing good, attending upon all the ordinances of God.<sup>25</sup> While this did have an element of prior concern for the fellow believer, this was a genuine attempt to work out Christianity within the context of the world in general. Living, vibrant Christianity concerned not just interior grace but also the outworking of such grace. It ought, therefore, to flow out into the home, the work-place, the leisure time and society in general. Here Wesley's vision to build biblically faithful communities of Christian disciples through whom 'scriptural holiness would spread over the land' comes into view but more will be said about this below.

Particularly in Europe, on the verge of the New Millennium, the challenge which faces the Church to offer an integrated spirituality is as great as it was in Wesley's day. Indeed, it could be argued that it is considerably increased. In a current Church of England report, the cult of the clairvoyant and star signs are described as 'the new religion'.<sup>26</sup> That this has a basis in fact is clear. According to a poll only 12 percent of the population go to Church while several times that number confess to reading their horoscopes and think themselves to be essentially religious.<sup>27</sup> Living, vibrant Christianity as expressed in the balanced spirituality of *Christian Perfection* has something vital to offer. It offers an integrated Spirituality which the world of the 21st Century would do well to examine again. Methodism, of course, must discover again the confidence to express that Spirituality with integrity and

<sup>25</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (Jackson) Vol VIII, pp. 269-271

<sup>26</sup> *The Search for Faith and Witness of the Church*, [London: Church House Publishing, 1996], pp. 74 -109

<sup>27</sup> Lawson, N., *Astrology and the need to believe*, *The Times*, Wednesday, November 13, 1996.

relevance.<sup>28</sup>

### A wholesome Ecumenism

Two of the six ways which Wesley believed were basic in his description of *Christian Perfection* were:

Love of God and Love of Neighbour

Having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.

Both can be seen to impact on the ecumenical front.

To the present writer there is no clearer way of illustrating this than by looking at Wesley's *Letter to a Roman Catholic*<sup>29</sup> and his sermon on the *Catholic Spirit*.<sup>30</sup> Of course, mention of Roman Catholicism must bring the acknowledgment that Wesley and Fletcher were men of their time. In relation to "anti-Papist prejudices"<sup>31</sup> both could be far from complimentary to the See of Rome. Yet, however contradictory it may appear<sup>32</sup> to be, both men also shared a breadth of vision which was not restricted by such prejudice but went far beyond their time and mind set. In the case of Wesley, this is a claim which is certainly justified when one contemporary writer can describe the *Letter to a Roman Catholic* as 'a basic agenda for a truly ecumenical dialogue'.<sup>33</sup> Even a cursory reading would make the reader feel it breathes something of the very atmosphere of the early 20th Century Ecumenical movement. 'Come my brother and let us reason together' wrote

<sup>28</sup> Integrity in the sense of being true to the spiritual 'field' behind the doctrinal hedge of Wesley and Fletcher and relevant in being able to convey the same to the New Millennium.

<sup>29</sup> *Letters*, Vol. III, pp. 7-14; *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 2, pp. 79-95

<sup>31</sup> Outler, A.C., *Introduction to Sermons*, *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vols 1-4, pp. 77,87

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps a similar contradiction can be found in the Rev. Dr I.R.K. Paisley who would denounce the Roman Catholic Institution while claiming to love individual Catholics. see: Cooke, W.D.D., *Persecuting Zeal*, [Dingle, Ireland: Brandon Book Publishers, 1996]

<sup>33</sup> Hurley, M., ed., *John Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic* [Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968] Not everyone of course would share Hurley's enthusiasm. Hempton describes Wesley's attitude to Catholicism as one of tolerant antagonism. Hempton, D., *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750 -1850*, [London: Hutchinson, 1984], pp. 33-49

Wesley, 'let us endeavour to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the kingdom'. The whole of the letter offers a model of tolerance and sensitivity. However, this should not be taken to mean that anything was acceptable; there was a definite doctrinal minimum. Essentially this was a definition of 'true Protestant' faith in terms of an expansion upon the Nicene Creed.<sup>34</sup> According to Wesley this was the 'old religion', a religion which every 'true Protestant' and true Catholic ought to accept. This established, he then went on to show how such a belief would effect behaviour, basically explaining it in terms of loving God 'with all his soul' and loving 'his neighbour – that is every man, friend or enemy, good or bad – as himself, as he loves his own soul, as Christ loved us'.<sup>35</sup> On this common ground Wesley was convinced he would have the approval of every true Catholic and every true Protestant. This in turn would mean that Catholic and Protestant together would be stimulated to 'love and good works' and also mutual help in 'whatever (they were) agreed leads to the kingdom'.<sup>36</sup> In terms of this thesis, the significant thing to note is Wesley's key use, yet again, of 'Love of God - Love of Neighbour'. Here was *Christian Perfection* being worked out in the real world of Christ's Church.

With the *Catholic Spirit*<sup>37</sup> the same thrust is evident albeit more formally and generally. Choosing what can only be described as a somewhat strange and extremely inappropriate passage for such a theme, Wesley takes the words of Jehu to Jehonadab, 'Is your heart true to mine as my heart is with yours?... If so, give me your hand'<sup>38</sup> as his text. He points out the central concern of Jehu was not about Jehonadab's strong or differing opinions, nor indeed his mode of worship although all of these may well

<sup>34</sup> *Letters*, Vol III, pp. 8-10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.11

<sup>36</sup> *Letters*, Vol. III, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 2, pp.79-95

<sup>38</sup> 2 Kings 10: 15.

have caused difficulty. The crucial issue was rather, the attitude of Jehonadab's heart. 'Is your heart true to mine as my heart is to yours?' This was what epitomised for Wesley the truly catholic spirit. For him the bottom line was to be united in the love of Christ. If this was so then there should be a willing acceptance of others' opinions and differences in worship, church government and denomination. Wesley could even allow that despite the presence of 'unscriptural doctrines' and 'superstitious modes of worship' the Church of Rome was part of the Church universal.<sup>39</sup> Of course, this did not mean that Wesley was indifferent to such things nor indeed, as has been noted earlier, that doctrine was unimportant. A person of the true catholic spirit will be 'as fixed as the sun concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine'.<sup>40</sup> Certainly he or she will not be into 'speculative latitudinarianism'.<sup>41</sup> It was rather that Wesley assumed, as in the *Letter to a Catholic*, that there was a consensus on the 'essentials'. This agreement on the 'essentials' should never produce in those within the agreement hostility towards those who have deviated from it or indeed, even rejected it. For the person of the true catholic spirit will be someone not only 'rooted in the faith once delivered to the saints' but he or she will also be 'grounded in love'.<sup>42</sup> This will mean that he or she will 'embrace with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies'. So anyone that is of a 'catholic spirit' will show 'catholic love' because in the final analysis 'catholic love is a catholic spirit'.<sup>43</sup> In essence then, the sum of the letter as well as sermon, both stated and implied, is 'loving God with all our heart

<sup>39</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 2, p. 52

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93

<sup>41</sup> This was a tradition of toleration of theoretical differences which had arisen as an alternative to a century of divisive controversy and conflict see *Ibid.*, p. 92 footnote 75.

<sup>42</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. 2, p. 95

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 94



and our neighbour as ourselves'.<sup>44</sup>

Here again the focus can rightly be seen in terms of the concept of *Christian Perfection*. In a very practical and biblical way the radical nature of the concept of *Christian Perfection* is being worked out in relation to the unity of Christ's body, the Church. Of course, given that the general ethos of Wesley's *Catholic Spirit* and the *Letter to a Roman Catholic* as has been described above, is indeed representative of his thinking, it would not be too far out to see in the same light, 'having the mind of Christ'. After all, Christ in the high Priestly prayer expressed the desire that all his followers should be one.<sup>45</sup> While Wesley referred to this part of the prayer as 'those remarkable words in our Lord's last, solemn prayer' he did not explicitly comment on the issue of unity for Christendom as a whole, his major concern being back-biting among Methodists.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, it would be difficult to deny that such a conclusion is not in the spirit of Wesley's thinking. It is, of course, true that Wesley can be criticised for wanting to have it both ways. On the one hand, he justifies the continuance of separate traditions while, on the other hand, he affirms 'the mutual recognition of a shared core and communion between them.'<sup>47</sup> But this is surely a healthy emphasis. It is a vision of unity in diversity not a unity of uniformity. It was not what Rupp called an 'ecclesiastical strip-tease'.<sup>48</sup> So in the matter of theology, for example, it did not mean rejection of doctrinal heritage; it was a 'reconciled diversity'.<sup>49</sup> In keeping with Wesley's emphasis on fellowship he saw a *koinonia*, which went beyond the narrow boundaries of denominationalism and met in the 'mystical' body of Christ. It is as

<sup>44</sup> This is confirmed in the instructions to those who are in the experience of Christian Perfection to beware of bigotry. *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 431

<sup>45</sup> John 17: 11, 20-21

<sup>46</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. 2, p.262

<sup>47</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol. 1, p. 87

<sup>48</sup> Rupp, E.G., *Principalities and Powers*, p. 87

<sup>49</sup> Moltmann, J., *Theology Today*, [London: SCM, 1988], p.44

Moltmann comments 'we come closer to one another when we come closer to Christ'.<sup>50</sup> Charles Wesley's words are fitting:

"Christ, from whom all blessings flow,  
Perfecting the saints below,  
Hear us who thy nature,  
Who thy mystic body are.

Join us, in one spirit join,  
Let us still receive of thine;  
Still for more on thee we call,  
Thou who fillest all in all

Love, like death, has all destroyed,  
Rendered all distinctions void;  
Names, and sects, and parties fall:  
Thou, O Christ, art all in all."<sup>51</sup>

For the present writer, the real challenge to the application of such an understanding of *Christian Perfection* must be the current impasse in the religious and political situation which is Northern Ireland. It would be no overstatement to say that the Irish problem, for almost thirty years has presented Christianity, with its ultimate challenge. That challenge is to bring a genuine reconciliation to communities which are divided not only politically but also in their own understanding of the Christ whom they profess to serve.<sup>52</sup> In the past the perception of the problem, certainly by those outside of the province, has been seen solely as a religious problem. Crudely put: Protestants and Catholics were fighting each other in the name of Christ. This simplistic analysis has long since been put to rest. Northern Ireland was unquestionably a political problem as also an economic and a social problem. However, in the opinion of the present writer, the pendulum has swung too far. It seems that the political dimension with its economic and social spin-offs holds the key to everything. This approach is reflected

<sup>50</sup> Moltmann, *Theology Today*, p. 42

<sup>51</sup> *Hymns and Psalms*, 764 vs 1,2,5

<sup>52</sup> Gallagher, R.D.E., & Worrall, S., *Christians in Ulster 1968-1980* [Oxford: University Press, 1982].

well in the words of one Roman Catholic commentator on Northern Ireland:

"The conflict in Northern Ireland is primarily political... I suspect the Churches will not change very much until politics change. I find that a depressing thing to say, but it is my impression. If I were looking for a peaceful development I would be looking for political changes first...One of the problems is that on ecumenical relationships—this is something which only occurred to me recently—Catholics perceive themselves as being politically oppressed by Protestants, while Protestants perceive themselves as being religiously oppressed by Catholics. There is something in that. From the point of view of the conflict as a whole, the movement must come from the political front. The Churches, obviously, have a responsibility but I see the major change coming from the political structures"<sup>53</sup>

While the depth of the political problem<sup>54</sup> cannot and should not be underestimated the power of the kingdom of God must not be reduced to second place. If *Christian Perfection* means anything it must mean that the 'love of God poured into (individual) hearts through the Holy Spirit'<sup>55</sup> will manifest itself in the *koinonia* of Christ. Such fellowship must by its very nature transcend the human barriers within the Protestant fold as well across and into the Roman Catholic fold. In the Cross of Christ enmity and alienation not only between God and humankind but also between humans has been abolished.<sup>56</sup> With the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost this began to be an experiential reality. Dempster makes the observation that:

"... the Holy Spirit is presented in the Acts as the One who empowers the church to overcome within its own community the

<sup>53</sup> Rev. B. Lennon S. J., member of the Inter church Group on Faith and Politics, at the New Ireland Forum in Dublin on 4 October 1983, quoted in: ***Northern Ireland - A Challenge to Theology***, [Edinburgh: Center for Theology and Public Issues, New College, Occasional Paper 12, 1987], p.25

<sup>54</sup> This is done recognising that in reality both cannot be separated and that any solution must involve both. As Gallagher and Worrall put it: 'To the Irish Protestant the reunification of Ireland seems to be a betrayal not only of his British nationality but of his Protestant heritage: a person supporting that policy is both a 'traitor' and an 'apostate'. Likewise for the Ulster Catholic to forgo his aspiration to unite Ireland is not only to deny his country 'one of her four green fields' but also to continue forever living in what to him is easily made to seem a sub-Christian or a non-Christian state' Ibid., p. 191

<sup>55</sup> Romans 5: 5

<sup>56</sup> Here Ephesians 2: 14- 22 is particularly appropriate.

entrenched gender, economic, cultural, and religious barriers of a divided world."<sup>57</sup>

He identifies examples of where, in his opinion, these distinctions began to be broken down by this empowerment of the Spirit. In Acts 2, for example, the gender distinctions of male and female were overcome by the Spirit's enablement, whereas in Acts 4 and 5 the economic distinctions between rich and poor were removed through an economic fellowship created by the Spirit. The cultural distinctions between Jew and Gentile, the focus of Acts 10, were also conquered by the Spirit's coming. And finally, in Acts 19 the religious distinctions between the disciples of Jesus and the disciples of John were overcome by the Spirit's power in what must have a first case of Christian ecumenism.<sup>58</sup> While all of Dempster's exegesis and examples may not be acceptable to everyone his main thesis is surely incontrovertible: the Holy Spirit is the One who empowers the Church to overcome worldliness within its own community. For the Church in Northern Ireland failure to overcome its worldliness in the matter of religious distinctions has been tragic.<sup>59</sup> In essence this tragedy has been the 'refusal of Christians to be Christian'<sup>60</sup>; Wesley's words have a certain pertinence:

<sup>57</sup> Dempster, M.W., *Pentecostal Social Concern and the Biblical Mandate of Social Justice*, *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, Fall 1987, No.9, p.148

<sup>58</sup> Dempster, M.W., *The Church's Moral Witness: A study of Glossolalia in Luke's Theology of Acts*, in *Paraclete: A Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 23, Winter 1989, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> In saying this the author does not wish to ignore the great work which goes on both formally and informally. The most recent grouping joining this work is probably that of Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland [ECONI], identified, as the name indicates, with Evangelical Christianity. Certainly it has attempted to engage in a very pertinent way with the problem. This can be seen in some of its publications. There is for example, *For God and his Glory Alone* [Belfast:ECONI,1993], a booklet setting out ten biblical principles which it is argued relate to the situation in Northern Ireland. Yet the present writer would have to conclude that in real terms the contemporary situation is at least as polarised as it ever has been. In fact it does seem very much more polarised than it has ever been! This has been confirmed by a recent report on the Churches and Inter-community relations to the Armagh Church Forum. Morrow, D., *Its not everyone you could tell that to*, [Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, 1997]

<sup>60</sup> Kinahan, T., *Where do we go from here? Protestants and the Future of Northern Ireland*, [Dublin: Columba Press, 1995], p. 92



"Put Papists and Protestants, French and English together the bulk of one and the other nation; and what manner of Christians are they? Are they 'holy as He who called them is holy'? Are they filled with 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost'? Is there the 'mind in them which was also in Christ Jesus?' And so they walk as Christ walked? Nay, they are as far from it as hell is from heaven".<sup>61</sup>

*Christian Perfection* is nothing more or less than 'real genuine Christianity'.<sup>62</sup> It is spelt out in Jesus' two great commandments, 'love God and love your neighbour'. The dynamic of the Spirit through which such a command can only be fulfilled is included within it as are the structures for the maintenance of such a challenging quality of life. Here is the 'optimism of grace' cleansing the heart from 'sectarian bitterness and religious and political bigotry'.<sup>63</sup> It is the direct result of being infected by the Spirit of him whom the Christian claims to worship.<sup>64</sup> Such optimism could allow an Irish Anglican to express a very moving :

"vision of a Protestant people infected by that Spirit: a Protestant people open to the religion and personhood and expectation of others; a Protestant people who have grown out of xenophobia into the all inclusive love of Christ; a Protestant people who have bravely stepped out in the search for truth, wherever that search may take them; a Protestant people who seek the unity of, and justice for, all our peoples, and are critically open to all possibilities; a Protestant people who are confident enough to be penitent about the past and optimistic about the future. In short...a vision of the people of Ulster, united in love for God, willing to serve him above all other; an Ulster in which the old ideologies have died away, and in which the kingdom of God is allowed to grow, unhindered by our historically conditioned fears, hatreds and aspirations".<sup>65</sup>

*Christian Perfection* is the Methodist expression of how such a vision can

<sup>61</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol 2, p. 488

<sup>62</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol VIII, pp.227 f.

<sup>63</sup> McMaster, J., Lecture Four, in *Brokenness, Forgiveness, Healing and Peace in Ireland: What should the Churches do?* Lenten Lectures at St Anne's, [Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, 1996] p.38

<sup>64</sup> Kinahan, *Where do we go from here? Protestants and the Future of Northern Ireland*, p. 93

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

be reality. For Irish Methodists the mandate of the founder of Methodism "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land" still has relevance. But to conclude, today no consideration of the catholic spirit could be complete without asking how such a spirit might affect those of other faiths. Given that the catholic spirit is catholic love one might expect at the very least respect for other faiths. But Wesley and Fletcher went much further. As can be seen in the *Essay on Truth*<sup>66</sup> both men believed that the grace of God was operative in other traditions. At the heart of this was the doctrine of dispensations; a key doctrine of Fletcher<sup>67</sup> in particular. He saw it as crucial in the controversy with the Calvinists.<sup>68</sup> In it God is seen to have made covenants with various parts of the human race. The original agreement had been with Adam, and after the flood with Noah, as representatives of early humanity. This was followed by covenants with Moses and John the Baptist. Utilising this doctrine, Fletcher and Wesley could argue that God was the God of the non-Christian as well as the God of the Christian and if the non-Christian responded to the word of truth as it was revealed in his or her dispensation he or she would become a child of God according to that light.<sup>69</sup> However, the ultimate aim of all people should be to live in the dispensation of the 'perfect Gospel of Christ'. This dispensation, according to Fletcher, included the "preceding ones in their full maturity, plus the coming of the Holy Spirit as indwelling, sanctifying Comforter to those who

<sup>66</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, pp.5-123

<sup>67</sup> Wesley, of course, was in agreement as Fletcher shows in the *Essay on truth*. He also expressed his favour in a letter dated 17 January 1775. He wrote: 'Mr Fletcher has given us a wonderful view of the different dispensations we are under. I believe that difficult subject was never placed in so clear a light before. It seems God has raised him up for this very thing.' *Letters*, Vol VI, p. 137.

<sup>68</sup> Fletcher stated: 'It is my key and my sword. With it I open the mysteries of election and reprobation; and with it I attempt to cut the Gordian (should I say the Calvinian and Pelagian?) knot'. *Fletcher's Works*, Vol II, p. 15-16

<sup>69</sup> Chapter 2, Christian Perfection - Fletcher's elaboration, p. 97 f.

obey.<sup>70</sup> Today this would be regarded as 'fulfilment theology'. In this idea the spirituality and grace of God are recognised in other religious traditions but ultimately they are destined to be fulfilled within the Christian tradition.<sup>71</sup> Although this position certainly has problems, it does allow the space in which to acknowledge the integrity of other traditions while at the same time holding to the exclusive claims of Christ. Of course, the final dispensation represented normal Christianity as encapsulated in the concept of *Christian Perfection*. As such the great commission given by Jesus to his followers to make disciples of all nations is not redundant. All should enjoy the fullness of life which is available in Christ. Mission can proceed on the basis that through God's grace his Spirit is already present with all people. The evangelist's task is, therefore, to act as the channel through which people will become aware not only of this but also of all that is available in Christ.<sup>72</sup>

### **A radical-social transformation**

*Christian Perfection* has been described as a concept with radical implications not only for personal ethics but also for social transformation.<sup>73</sup> Put simplistically *Christian Perfection* ought not just to be about changing people but also about changing society. Yet, as Leech<sup>74</sup> observes, this is both the 'potential' and the 'problem' for *Christian Perfection*. In overcoming the false alternative between the spiritual and the social, Leech believes 'Scriptural Holiness' offers the Church a valuable resource. As such it could make a major contribution to the renewal of spirituality in the last part of the

<sup>70</sup> Knight, J.A., *John William Fletcher and the early Methodist Tradition*, Vanderbilt University Ph.D. thesis, 1966, p.183

<sup>71</sup> Whaling, F., *Wesley's Premonitions of Inter-Faith Discourse*, in Macquiban, T.S.A., (ed.) ***Pure, universal love: Reflections on the Wesleys' and Interfaith dialogue***, [Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1995]

<sup>72</sup> Davies, W.R., ***Spirit without Measure***, [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996], p. 158

<sup>73</sup> ***Wesley's Works***, [BE] Vol 2, p. 99

<sup>74</sup> Leech, ***The Eye of the Storm***, p.28

20th century thus encouraging a transformation within society at large. The problem however, is the maintenance of that connection. Will sanctification indeed lead to a dissatisfaction with the prevailing order? And will the stress on 'Scriptural Holiness' lead to an examination of what it means for communities which seek to embody holiness and justice? In echoes of Dale's analysis,<sup>75</sup> *Christian Perfection* should offer a resource which would impact on the political and social life of the nation but it could also stop short leaving only haunting implications. The key element here must be the enabling structures.

Wesley's vision was to build biblically faithful communities of Christian disciples through whom 'Scriptural Holiness would be spread over the land'.<sup>76</sup> 'Scriptural Holiness', it was true, began with the individual but Wesley was convinced it could only continue and spread if it was enabled to do so in the context of committed and intensively disciplined communities. Within such communities living, vibrant Christianity would not only mean a change of lifestyle for the individual, it would also mean that both individually and collectively, consciously or otherwise, those for whom vibrant Christianity was now an experiential reality, would become agents of change within their world. So in the sermon, *Scriptural Christianity*, believers are seen to come 'together into intentional communities as intensive change agents and soon they in turn are quietly affecting society'<sup>77</sup> like salt, light and leaven.<sup>78</sup> In this way the biblical promise that 'the earth would be full with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' had begun to be fulfilled.<sup>79</sup> Similar thinking can be found in the sermon on

<sup>75</sup> Dale, *The Evangelical Revival and Other Sermons*, p.39

<sup>76</sup> above p. 233

<sup>77</sup> Oden, T.C., *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1994], p.225

<sup>78</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol. 1, p.165

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.170; see also Isaiah 11: 9



the *General Spread of the Gospel*.<sup>80</sup> Here the Evangelical Revival is offered as proof of the possibility and potential of the grace of God to effect holiness and happiness on the earth. On the evidence of such beginnings the Christian was encouraged to look forward to the total transformation of the whole human condition.

This is not to say that Wesley saw the kingdom of God in terms of a Christianised society.<sup>81</sup> The fullness of the Kingdom of God must wait for the final consummation, that is, the return of Jesus Christ.<sup>82</sup> However, there was an expectation of sharing in some measure in the reality of kingdom ethics in the here and now.<sup>83</sup> Wesley referred to the Kingdom of God as 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost'.<sup>84</sup> Here, as he comments, righteousness is 'the image of God stamped on the heart; love of God and love of man...'<sup>85</sup> As such it was about reproducing and expressing the character of God within the lives of his children now. This certainly meant a change of lifestyle for the individual believer. That this should impact on more than just the 'underground level of psychic life'<sup>86</sup> is clear. Too often the criticism about those who stress spiritual experience is that they fail to show any real concern about changing present society. While this accusation is not without justification it is certainly not beyond criticism,

<sup>80</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol 2, pp. 485-499.

<sup>81</sup> One could find hints of millenarianism here. Methodism was not a millenarian sect but as Rack observes Wesley sometimes can appear to have a touch of 'post-millennialism' brought on perhaps by the evidence of local revivalism and the ferment in Europe. See: Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, pp.491, 382; Of course Wesley did record Bengel's speculation regarding the beginning of the millennium in 1836 but he did not commit himself to it. See: *Notes*, p. 436 Indeed in a letter he stated: 'I have no opinion at all upon that head. I can determine nothing about it. These calculations are far above, out of my sight' *Letters*, Vol. VIII, p. 63, 67

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, in *Notes*, Romans 8: 18-26; I John 3: 2; Revelation 21: 1-6. Also Sermon 64, *The New Creation*, *Wesley's Works* (BE), Vol. 2, pp. 500-510.

<sup>83</sup> Matthew 5-7 ; Jones, E.S., *The Christ of the Mount*, [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931]. Jones, a Wesleyan thinker, seeks to give a practical exposition of this.

<sup>84</sup> Romans 14:17

<sup>85</sup> *Notes*, p.240

<sup>86</sup> Bonino, J. M., *Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification from a Liberationist perspective*, in Runyon, T., *Sanctification and Liberation*, [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981], p. 51

after all, one of the distinct marks of the ethics of the Kingdom is that a priority is placed on inner attitudes and intentions because they clearly underlie outward conduct.<sup>87</sup>

In thought and in practice, the evidence is unmistakable that Wesley and the early Methodists understood that their experience of Christ should impact on society. Among the benefits associated with *Christian Perfection* Fletcher, for example, lists that of being a better member of society. Being a better member of society, of course, did not necessarily mean that such a person would want to challenge the prevailing order. Yet the great variety of political, social and moral issues to which Wesley addressed himself in the penny pamphlets could hardly be construed in any other way. Again, his efforts in such diverse areas of concern as community health, political corruption, smuggling, slavery, education and interest-free loans suggest the same concern for change.<sup>88</sup> This, as already has been implied, is not to suggest that such communities were to be seen in terms of a precursor to a Marxist 'proletariat vanguard'.<sup>89</sup> Wesley, for example, did not attempt any fundamental critique of the emerging industrial society as Marx was to do a century later. His concern was primarily that of an evangelist. However, as Outler observes, he was as much 'an atypical evangelist' as he was 'an atypical revolutionary'.<sup>90</sup> While his supreme desire was to 'preach (Christ) to all',<sup>91</sup> he was not content to leave it there. The gospel was not only to be proclaimed, it was to be lived out in concrete terms. Certainly Methodism's contribution to social reform has been grossly exaggerated but this should

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<sup>87</sup> See, for example: Matthew 5: 21-30

<sup>88</sup> Weems, L.H, *John Wesley's Message Today*, [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991], pp. 64-70 For examples see Andrews, S., *Methodism and Society*, [London: Longmans, 1970], pp. 49-53

<sup>89</sup> Marx, K., quoted in Mills, C.W., *The Marxists*, [London: Penguin Books, 1963], p.126

<sup>90</sup> Outler, *Willson Lectures*, p. 4

<sup>91</sup> Hymn: *Jesus the name high over all*, *Hymns and Psalms*, 264 v 6

not result in the opposite error, an underestimation.<sup>92</sup> The impact of the 'ethical transformation of innumerable individuals and whole communities' did have a lasting and effective contribution to English life.<sup>93</sup> No doubt Wesley cannot be described in terms of a social or political revolutionary. Nevertheless, given the limitations of his world,<sup>94</sup> he must be someone who at the very least can be described as a 'transformer of culture'.<sup>95</sup> That it was his conception of *Christian Perfection* developed and sustained within the group structure of the Methodist communities which gave motivation [and the present writer would also argue the dynamic] to such transformation is undeniable.<sup>96</sup>

It does not seem difficult to apply this to today. Thinkers outside of Methodism have recognised the significance of the small cell-group some indeed have seen its necessity if Christianity is to survive in the New Millennium. MacIntyre writes of the need for a 'network of small groups of

<sup>92</sup> For example: Bready, J.W., *England Before and After Wesley*, [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938]; Halevy, E., *The Birth of Methodism*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971]. Halevy argued that Wesley was primarily responsible for saving England from a French style revolution.

<sup>93</sup> Rupp, E.G., *Principalities and Powers*, p.87

<sup>94</sup> Bonino, for example, points out that Wesley was unable to see the structural nature of the social problems with which he was trying to grapple. Wesley, he acknowledged, had been extraordinary as a religious leader in attempting to work with the hard information of statistics, prices and market conditions. But he was blind to the fact that the poverty he condemned was the result of the economic system within which he worked. It was 'the inescapable sacrifice which the gods of the new order demanded'. *Sanctification and Liberation*, p.59 f. However as Kenneth E. Boulding states 'It was not the economists who liberated the slaves or who passed the Factory Acts, but rash ignorant Christians', quoted in, Schilling, S.P., *Methodism and Society in Theological Perspective*, [New York: Abingdon Press, 1960], p. 64

<sup>95</sup> Turner, J.M., *Conflict and Reconciliation*, p. 56 Of course it is true that 'culture' in the eyes of the Methodists sometimes could be regarded as worldliness. John Pawson burnt Wesley's copy of Shakespeare as rubbish. An act which reveals one not uncommon view among preachers and congregation. Yet the fact that Wesley had annotated it is not insignificant. See Workman, H.B., *New History of Methodism*, [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909] p.32. John Wesley whilst enjoying Beverly Minster reminds himself that it will be destroyed in the Second Coming. Again on a visit to the British Museum he marvels at the range and number of artifacts but wonders how anyone who has spent his or her life collecting such things will give account to the 'Judge of the quick and dead'. See: *Wesley's Works*, (BE) Vol 22, p.50; Vol. 23, p.190. So there was a tension which is perhaps not unusual even today.

<sup>96</sup> Rack, H.D., *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 449

friends' and for the reconstruction of local forms of community which can sustain the practice of virtue during 'the Dark Ages which are already upon us.'<sup>97</sup> A similar note was struck by Gregorios at the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver in 1983. Speaking to the Assembly's theme, *Jesus Christ the Life of the World*, Gregorios attempted to show that Jesus Christ in the incarnation had affected all levels of life and how relevant this was in a world so threatened by such deadly peril.<sup>98</sup> He summarised four perils which threatened not only human life but all life:

The nuclear peril  
The peril of biotechnology  
The ecological peril  
The peril of global injustice.

Yet just as all life was threatened by such awful menace, Gregorios believed so too, all life had been affected by the event of the incarnation. In it, Christ had united irrevocably human and divine life overcoming sin and death. This meant that ultimately all forms of life and non-life would become a unified though 'differentiated whole in the risen Jesus Christ'. This was indeed good news. Between the times, therefore, the task of the Church, as a community of faith, was to live the life which overcomes death radiating it to the world around. This, of course, was only possible because the believer was united with the Giver of life himself. However, Gregorios felt it would be unrealistic to expect such levels of faith within present Church structures. The more practical possibility was to found smaller pioneering communities of faith. These communities would be made up of Christians who, having overcome the fear of death<sup>99</sup> and being thoroughly convinced of the living presence of Jesus Christ, would seek to work out the implications of their

<sup>97</sup> MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue*, [London: Duckworth, 1981]

<sup>98</sup> Gregorios, P.M., *Life from the Perspective of Science*, in Lazareth, W.H., ed. *The Lord of Life*, [Geneva: WCC, 1983], pp. 34-43

<sup>99</sup> Here it is interesting to note that one of the characteristic things about *Christian Perfection* was the strength derived in the face of death.



faith within this world of deadly peril. As Gregorios saw it, to do this they will be firmly grounded in two worlds:

“the modern world of science and technology, of poverty and injustice, of rootlessness and lovelessness on the one hand, and on the other, the life giving powers of the Spirit operating in a genuine community of faith and worship”.<sup>100</sup>

Without question Wesley would have approved. It echoes the same vision in which he sought to establish; biblically faithful communities who would know the life of God within and challenge and reform the life of the world around. It was not just an ‘optimism of nature’ whereby ‘things could only get better’.<sup>101</sup> Nor was it merely a religious moralism exhorting high ideals but offering little by way of power to achieve such. Equally it was not simply some pious religious experience where the believer focuses only on his or her own spiritual navel and ‘a curtain hangs between the life of the soul with God and the life of man with man’.<sup>102</sup> It was rather an ‘optimism of grace’ where, through the creative dynamic of the Spirit, communities of faith would become visible expressions of the reign of God pressed into the present. There would be the tension between the ‘now’ of the present and the ‘not yet’ of the future just as there was in the individual sense. Yet this

<sup>100</sup> Gregorios, *The Lord of Life*, p. 37

<sup>101</sup> Historians have suggested that the concept of *Christian Perfection*, if not directly related to, is at least coloured by the spirit of the age in the 18th Century. Bebbington, for example, sees the Methodist notion of the ‘perfectibility of man’ as a reflection of the optimistic temper of the later Enlightenment. Bebbington, D.W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, [London: Unwin Hyman, 1989], p. 60. Kent in further analysis notes there were two socially-induced religious outlooks which coexisted in the period. There was an old world view characterised by pessimism about humanity and a distrust of materialism and worldly involvement. Alongside this perspective there was the rising new world view in all things altogether more optimistic. Wesley and the early Methodists can be seen as having a blend of the two. Kent, J., in Cunliffe-Jones, H., ed., *A History of Christian Doctrine*, [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978], pp. 473-480., Whilst there is no attempt here to ignore such factors a theologian must also take account of the God factor. Rack’s comment is appropriate: ‘The tone of optimism...coloured by contemporary Enlightenment ideas... but placed in a context of grace...’ Rack, H.D., *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 401. Wesley took sin and grace seriously. Rack, H.D., *The Future of John Wesley’s Methodism*, p. 14

<sup>102</sup> Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, p. 340

could be a creative tension, the hall mark of Christian ethics at its best.<sup>103</sup> For this is the reality of the Kingdom of God itself.

Certainly the implications are radical. Dempster provides a useful practical summary of just how revolutionary the ethics of God's reign could be for humanity. He stated:

"The eschatological Kingdom has a normative moral structure reflective of God's own moral character. Jesus taught, therefore, that where God reigns, a new redemptive society is formed in which brothers and sisters enjoy an affirmative community, strangers are incorporated into the circle of neighbour love; peace is made with enemies; injustices are rectified; the poor experience solidarity with the human family and the creation; generous sharing results in the just satisfaction of human needs in which no one suffers deprivation; and all persons are entitled to respect are to be treated with dignity, and are deserving of justice because they share the status of God's image-bearers. Such actions and social practices that embody love, justice, and shalom constitute the normative moral structure in a social ethic reflective of God's kingly rule".<sup>104</sup>

The implications of 'Scriptural Holiness' or *Christian Perfection* are indeed far reaching. Certainly, within the Irish setting the ethics of the Kingdom present a tremendous challenge. Already in the previous section particular attention has been given to what might be called the religious/political problem in Northern Ireland. But as can be seen from Dempster it cannot stop there. Wholeness, another way of expressing *Christian Perfection*, involves the whole of human life including, for example, the environment.<sup>105</sup> In a short but not insignificant report from a Churches Joint Working Party where the environmental problems in Ireland are listed, the connection

<sup>103</sup> Gill, R., *A Textbook of Christian Ethics*, [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985], p. 549

<sup>104</sup> Dempster, M.W., *Evangelism, Social Concern, and the Kingdom of God* in Dempster, M.W., Klaus, B.D., Petersen, D., (eds), *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, [Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991], p.24

<sup>105</sup> In recent report received and approved by the Methodist Conference in Ireland, Scriptural Holiness is defined in terms of wholeness. see: *Minutes of Conference, Dublin 1993*, pp.38-39

between the environment and love of neighbour is clearly made.<sup>106</sup> Also, in a more recent report, the Methodist Church in Ireland stated its commitment in bringing wholeness:

“to the healing of broken persons, broken communities and an exploited environment ...”<sup>107</sup>

The challenge is indeed overwhelming. Yet if God's reign is pressing into the present then the challenge must be the possibility. The resource of *Christian Perfection* offers a way to participate in Kingdom ethics in the here and now. McMaster, acknowledging the past failures of Irish Methodism to come to terms with its own doctrinal heritage of Scriptural Holiness, calls for a renewed effort to develop the doctrine ‘reshaping’ it to ‘social and political holiness’.<sup>108</sup> The call to discover again the heritage is timely. This is part of the ‘potential’ of *Christian Perfection*. Indeed the ‘future belongs to those who can relate the heritage of the past to the reality of the present’.<sup>109</sup> However, the suggestion to ‘reshape’ is not. *Christian Perfection* does not need to be reshaped; it must be presented in its wholeness. As Whaling observes ‘it is not so much that (the Wesley’s Spirituality) has been tried and found wanting.. but that in its wholeness it has never been fully tried.’<sup>110</sup> The work must be to begin.

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<sup>106</sup> *Environmental Problems in Ireland*, compiled for the Joint Group on Social Problems of the Irish Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland in 1980

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.39

<sup>108</sup> McMaster, J., Lecture Four, in *Brokenness, Forgiveness, Healing and Peace in Ireland: What should the Churches do?*, p.39

<sup>109</sup> McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, p.116

<sup>110</sup> Whaling, *John and Charles Wesley*, p.64

## Conclusion

*Christian Perfection* then is more than any one of its parts. To interpret the concept in terms of 'perfect sanctification', however qualified, is misleading and wrong. While sanctification is part of the picture it should never be allowed to become the whole picture. *Christian Perfection* is the 'category of interpretation' connecting a number of associated ideas which, in total, express for Wesley and Fletcher Christianity as it was intended to be. The six facets which, individually or collectively, Wesley saw as *Christian Perfection* in its native state, illustrate this point and certainly give the lie to any narrow interpretation of the concept.

**Loving God and neighbour** clearly holds together the horizontal and vertical relationships of what can only be described as a truly comprehensive and balanced biblical Christianity. While it is true that such a presentation of Christianity demands from the individual and the community nothing short of total commitment, it does so in the belief that the love of God is already shed abroad in the heart of the believer.<sup>1</sup> It is right to conclude that there is 'nothing higher or lower' than this. The fact that the presentation of such a wholehearted Christianity has in the past been obscured by arguments concerning 'perfection' and 'sinlessness' need not mean that this should continue to be the case. **Renewal in the image of God** was a basic theme of Wesley.<sup>2</sup> In this, he was, of course, being biblical.<sup>3</sup> However, within the context of *Christian Perfection*, this basic motif has too often been interpreted in terms of a crisis of sanctification. But it is the belief of the present writer that Wesley sees renewal in the image of God in a much broader way. It is again another aspect of what it really

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 5: 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Wesley's Works*, (BE), Vol 1, p.118 n. 5

<sup>3</sup> Outler also points out the influence of Irenaeus's doctrine of the recapitulatory work of Christ as the ground of all salvation. This of course takes in all of creation. *Ibid.*, Vol 1, p. 75



means to be a Christian, another biblical description of what God is about in salvation. Wesley stated:

"This great gift of God, the salvation of our souls, is no other than the image of God stamped fresh on our hearts."<sup>4</sup>

If the word 'sanctification' is applied to this aspect, it might well be reduced to some narrow and exclusive sectarian experience occurring after conversion. 'Renewal', however, is a much more comprehensive and dynamic term. It holds within it the present experience of glorification through the work of the Spirit as well as anticipating the future glorification which is to come with the resurrection of the body. So, for example, Paul refers to the believer 'being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another' as well as looking forward to the Lord Jesus Christ [changing] the lowly body to be like 'his glorious body'.<sup>5</sup> It was just such a renewal with which Wesley and Fletcher were concerned within the dynamic of the instantaneous and the gradual. Here indeed was 'glory begun' an ongoing work of the Spirit which would go on right into eternity. As Charles Wesley wrote:

"Finish then thy new creation,  
Pure and spotless let us be;  
Let us see thy great salvation,  
Perfectly restored in thee:  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!"<sup>6</sup>

It is important to emphasize that both men recognised clearly that the basis of such renewal lay solely in the redemptive work of Christ. Wesley comments on the passage in Colossians<sup>7</sup> which refers to the renewal of the image of

<sup>4</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p.378

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 3: 18; Philipians 3: 20 f. see also 1 Corinthians 15: 49 ff; Romans 8: 29; Colossians 3: 10

<sup>6</sup> *Hymns and Psalms*, 267 v. 3

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 3:10-12

God by stating:

"But Christ is in all that are thus renewed, and is all things in them and to them."<sup>8</sup>

As he pointed out to his friend Charles Perronet, 'Christ dying for us' and 'Christ reigning in us' were the two points which preachers should 'uniformly and steadily insist on' to all congregations.<sup>9</sup> Such an emphasis would, Wesley believed, 'shake the trembling gates of hell'. That Fletcher supported him in this is clear. In the same correspondence Wesley indicates his own encouragement that the preachers were indeed becoming clear on this issue especially after reading 'Mr Fletcher's Checks'.<sup>10</sup> However, they were sure that what lay in potential should be experienced in reality. Renewal was about being conformed to the likeness of Christ, who himself is the image of God. Wesley believed that everything was given in Christ but the pastoral implications were such that generally the experiential reality of living with such wealth took some time.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, when he describes renewal in terms of God stamping his own image upon the Christian, this should not be seen in some absolute sense. If it had been, he would not have spoken of the ongoing aspect of the Spirit's transformation. Neither would he have emphasised, as he did in the 'advices' and 'reflections', the continuing need for the individual believer to actively co-operate with the Spirit. Of course, Wesley did refer to the experience in terms of God as the Trinity coming to dwell in the believer's life.<sup>12</sup> No doubt the language used here could well be seen as suggesting a definitive something subsequent to salvation and therefore additional to Christ's work. But the argument of this thesis is that having considered the

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<sup>8</sup> **Notes** p.315

<sup>9</sup> **Letters**, Vol VI, p.134

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 1, *Christian Perfection: Wesley's exposition*, p. 14 f.

<sup>12</sup> **Wesley Works**, Vol. XI, p. 381

context it should be understood as no more than a pastoral accommodation. Here the believer discovers the experiential knowledge of what God has already accomplished for him or her and promised to him or her in Christ.

**Being cleansed from sin** is without doubt the most well known and controversial aspect of *Christian Perfection*. It has been accepted within this thesis that statements made by Wesley and Fletcher can seem to be, to say the least, ambiguous. However, given the overall context, [that is taking into consideration the controversy and the insistence of Wesley and Fletcher in holding together the instantaneous and the gradual] it has been argued that Wesley and Fletcher should not be condemned for preaching a 'sinless perfection'. Both men believed that the quality of Christianity presented in the New Testament was rich and abundant. They rejected contemporary Calvinistic understanding of the Christian life which they perceived to be as one of continual life struggle with the inner conflict of 'indwelling sin'. This struggle would only finally be ended at the point of death. While Wesley and Fletcher recognised that there would indeed always be a conflict with sin, they nevertheless believed that such a conflict could be fought from a position of strength. Such victory over sin could be seen in terms of the First Epistle of John. In this Epistle, freedom from sin was experienced by the believer as he or she 'walked in the light'.<sup>13</sup> Here sinlessness did not depend on some attenuated definition of sin but rather on the work of Christ as the believer 'walked in the light'. As the image of walking indicates, this was not some state of perfection into which the believer arrived. It was rather a relationship of fellowship with the Father and the Son<sup>14</sup> where the obstacle to such fellowship, the consciousness of sin, had been removed,

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<sup>13</sup> 1 John 1: 7

<sup>14</sup> Of course the social and communal aspects of the fellowship should not be overlooked in this passage. The writer speaks of 'fellowship with one another'.

by, on the God-ward side, the 'blood of Christ', and on the human-ward side, 'walking in the light'. As noted earlier the similarity between the idea of 'walking in the light' and 'abiding in the vine' is striking. In both concepts the idea of fellowship and communion with the Father and the Son are paramount. This point can also be seen when Wesley speaks of renewal in God's image using words that resonate with some words in the Gospel of John.<sup>15</sup> Freedom from sin is, therefore, not an eradication of sinful tendencies, or the extraction of some spiritual wisdom tooth called 'sin'! While the believer could indeed look forward to the day in God's new creation when he or she would be completely free from every root of sin, this was not the offer of Wesley and Fletcher now. True, this being said, it was important to recognise that the process had already begun, for the Christian lives in the overlap of the ages. God is already on the scene and the Christian already belongs to the future and as such he or she will already have a foretaste of what God can do! As Wesley put it:

"Thou art my light my holiness and my heaven, Through my union with thee, I am full of light, of holiness, and happiness..."<sup>16</sup>

The experiential knowledge of such union, as he makes clear, does not mean that the Christian has just arrived on some high plateau of spiritual achievement. Rather, as is consistent with the images of 'walking' and 'abiding', it means that the believer has discovered the reality of a 'moment by moment' relationship with Christ where the work of the cross consciously goes on cleansing the believer with the result that he or she has happy

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<sup>15</sup> "He cometh unto them with his Son and blessed Spirit, and fixing his abode in their soul.." **Wesley's Works** Vol XI, p. 381. The words in John read: "If any man loves me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him" John 14: 23. Wesley in his *New Testament Notes* describes this as "such a large manifestation of the divine presence and love that the former, in justification, is nothing in comparison to it." This need not be interpreted as a second work of grace; the emphasis is on the manifestation.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.



fellowship with the Father and the Son.<sup>17</sup> So when Fletcher makes the dangerous utterance, 'I am freed from sin' or Wesley ambiguously states, 'Is it sinless? It is not worthwhile to contend for a term. It is salvation from sin.'<sup>18</sup> These and similar statements should not be taken as presenting a 'theological dictum' regarding the sinless life but rather should be seen as the expression of the possibility of 'unimpeded communion with God'.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, such communion should be seen in the experiential terms of possessing one's possessions for Fletcher like Wesley believed that the emphasis on sanctification should be placed first and foremost on the God-ward side and not on the human-ward side. Fletcher stated: "The work of sanctification<sup>20</sup> is hindered ...by holding out the being delivered from sin as the mark to be aimed at instead of being rooted in Christ and being filled with the fullness of God."<sup>21</sup> Again the emphasis is on the grace of God as it is revealed in Christ for 'Every moment, Lord, I need the merit of your death'.<sup>22</sup> Once more the concern is about the quality of Christian living.

**Having all the mind of Christ and walking as he walked** if somewhat daunting certainly is in keeping with the emphasis of the New Testament and expresses something very basic about the nature of being a Christian: being a Christian is nothing less or more than being like Jesus. Both Wesley and Fletcher ardently believed this to be a scriptural model of what it meant to be a Christian. As Wesley indicates at the very commencement of the *Plain Account* 'having the mind of Christ' and 'walking as Christ walked' must be regarded as the 'indispensable

<sup>17</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol XI, p. 381

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442.

<sup>19</sup> Lawton, G., *Shropshire Saint: A Study in the Ministry and Spirituality of Fletcher of Madeley*, [London: Epworth Press, 1960], p. xii.

<sup>20</sup> No doubt he is here referring to the work on the human side.

<sup>21</sup> quoted in Lawton, p. xii, *Fletcher's Works*, Vol I, p.311

<sup>22</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 448.

necessity' of Christianity.<sup>23</sup> For Fletcher the importance of the coming of the Spirit was not to be seen in the outward phenomena but rather in that which was 'essential to all Christians in all ages', that is, 'the mind which was in Christ'.<sup>24</sup> Charles Wesley put the emphasis into song:

"A heart in every thought renewed,  
And full of love divine;  
Perfect, and right, and pure, and good,  
A copy, Lord, of thine!

Thy nature gracious Lord impart;  
Come quickly from above,  
Write thy new name upon my heart,  
Thy new, best name of love."<sup>25</sup>

Once more this emphasis should not be pressed into meaning some absolute state of perfection despite the occurrence of the oft repeated word 'all' or the use of the word 'perfect' in the hymn. On the contrary, it presents yet again the more dynamic understanding of the Christian way which is clearly in keeping with the images already referred to above in the Johannine literature.<sup>26</sup> Indeed it might even be argued that the reference to 'walking as he walked' came directly from the First Epistle of John.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not this is true the Johannine thought that the validity of a person's claim to be in fellowship with the Father [i.e. enjoying Christian life as God intended] will only be shown to be true if the conduct of his or her life reflects the life of Jesus, is certainly in line with the thinking of Wesley and Fletcher. But even more importantly, while such conduct does indeed reveal the truth or falsity of any such claim, within the Johannine writings it must also be related to that aspect of 'fellowship with the Father' which is implicit in the phrase 'abiding in him'. Here, not only the requirement of

<sup>23</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p.367

<sup>24</sup> *Fletcher's Works*, Vol. IV, p. 121

<sup>25</sup> *Hymns and Psalms* 536 vv 4-5

<sup>26</sup> 'Walking' and 'Abiding'

<sup>27</sup> 1 John 2: 6

being like Jesus is highlighted but also the fact of the divine provision so that this can be a reality. As Bruce has observed:

"The verb 'abide' appears... frequently in the Johannine Gospel and Epistles with the distinctive sense, setting forth the mutual coinherence of the believer in Christ [and in the Father] and of Christ in the believer."<sup>28</sup>

In terms of Wesley and Fletcher the stress was 'Christ is reigning in us' or as both men liked to express it, in the words of Paul, 'I live yet not I but Christ liveth in me'.<sup>29</sup> This, therefore, meant that the divine resource where Christ was 'all and in all'<sup>30</sup> should always be seen alongside the divine command. So in this aspect as with the others, the emphasis was not on some static state of entire sanctification but on an ever increasing process of transformation into the likeness of Jesus, a process dependent on the grace of God and the co-operation of the individual.

**Devoting soul, body, and substance, not in part but all to God** was in Wesley's opinion simply another way of expressing the importance having 'the mind of Christ' or 'walking as He walked'.<sup>31</sup> Such devotion could be seen in the declared goal of the life of Jesus: to do the will of God. If, therefore the believer was going to emulate the Master then she or he must focus on the same goal. There could be no half measures, it must be all for God.<sup>32</sup> In Wesley's understanding anyone who calls himself or herself a Christian could not possibly object to such devotion.<sup>33</sup>

**Giving God all our heart with one design ruling all our tempers,** for the present writer, picks up more specifically on the aspect of love. The biblical theme of being active in service but failing in love is clear. The

<sup>28</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 80 note 12

<sup>29</sup> *Wesley Works*, Vol XI, p. 377; *Fletcher's Works*, Vol 1, p. 314

<sup>30</sup> *Hymns and Psalms*, 726 v.6

<sup>31</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 385

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 445

ultimate description of what it means to be truly Christian is to 'walk in love'. As Paul makes clear to the Corinthians<sup>34</sup> spirituality was not simply to be judged by gifts or activities. It was to be seen in love. But this should not be taken as a matter of service or love, nor even service motivated by love. It was rather that the person who serves or who exercises a gift also has his or her life given to love.<sup>35</sup> Of course, this is really another way of saying that the life is given to God. It should come as no surprise therefore to find that Charles Wesley in one hymn makes love synonymous with God himself. He wrote:

"Love our real holiness,  
Love our spotless character  
Love is liberty and peace  
Pardon and perfection here;  
Less than this cannot suffice;  
Love be Thou our all in all;  
Then we in Thine image rise,  
Then we into nothing fall."<sup>36</sup>

Again, it would be wrong to take such an emphasis and see it as the explanation *par excellence* of *Christian Perfection* as in the sense of some crisis experience. While the term 'Perfect Love' may offer to some at least a slightly more acceptable presentation of what Wesley and Fletcher were about, to put *Christian Perfection* into the strait-jacket of an 'experience' of the 'imparting of total love'<sup>37</sup> would be extremely wide of the mark. Love, it is true, can be said to be at the heart of Methodist Theology in general<sup>38</sup> and *Christian Perfection* in particular<sup>39</sup> but in saying this it must be seen in the fullest sense, as the sum of all Christian religion. In the *Plain Account* in

<sup>34</sup> 1 Corinthians 13

<sup>35</sup> Fee, G.D, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987 reprinted 1993] p. 629

<sup>36</sup> quoted in: Tyson, J.R., *Charles Wesley on Sanctification*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], p. 163

<sup>37</sup> Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p.139

<sup>38</sup> Albin, T.R., *John Wesley*, in the *New Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 718-720

<sup>39</sup> above p. 253



one the most powerful passages by Wesley on the subject of love he stated:

"It were well you should be thoroughly sensible of this,- 'the heaven of heavens is love'. There is nothing higher in religion; there is in effect nothing else; if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way. And when you are asking others, 'Have you received this or that blessing?' if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them upon a false scent. Settle it then in your heart, that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing more, but more of that love described in the thirteenth of the Corinthians."<sup>40</sup>

Here the emphasis is not on a 'bare freedom from sin'<sup>41</sup> but on a life filled with the life of God, the life of the God who is love. Wesley reasoned quite simply that where God is, there love is; and love will exclude sin. But the whole thrust yet once more was on the dynamic nature of a living, vibrant normal Christianity.

In Wesley's mind these six facets indicate nothing more or less than what it means to be a normal Christian and are his own declared attempt at expressing what is absolutely basic to the concept of *Christian Perfection*. That Fletcher was in agreement with such an understanding is clear. Mediocre Christianity did not deserve the name of being Christian in his mind. It could well be argued that Fletcher's definition of *Christian Perfection*, as the 'maturity of grace and holiness' seen in adult Christians summed up what Wesley elaborated in his six facets. Indeed, Fletcher's own description of the 'cluster and maturity of graces which composed the Christian character in the church militant'<sup>42</sup> picks up on these aspects. There is further elaboration of such maturity when he deals with the *Prejudiced Imperfectionists*.<sup>43</sup> He identifies certain characteristics which the Christian

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<sup>40</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 430

<sup>41</sup> *Notes*, Ephesians 3: 19., p. 298

<sup>42</sup> Chapter 2 *Christian Perfection*: Fletcher's elaboration, p.48

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63 ff.

should experience: full assurance of faith, intimate communion with God resulting in remarkable answers to prayer, better members of society and the consciousness of the kingdom of God within. This was what Paul described, and Wesley and Fletcher accepted, as 'righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost'.<sup>44</sup> But as with Wesley such 'maturity' was not to be understood in terms of some finished or perfected state. Just as in the natural sense adulthood cannot be taken as finished and completed, it seems fair to see the same applying in the spiritual realm. Certainly when biblical backing for such a conclusion is sought it can be easily found.<sup>45</sup> To the present writer, at least there is no need to see in Fletcher more than in Wesley an emphasis on *Christian Perfection* as maturity.<sup>46</sup> Neither are there substantial grounds for seeing any real discrepancy in their views on the work of the Spirit in relation to *Christian Perfection*. Indeed, it would seem fair to conclude that with both men together the emphasis is both biblical and balanced.

*Christian Perfection* then is the Wesley/Fletcher 'category of interpretation' for normal Christianity. It encompasses both the crisis and process aspects of the work of God in the life of the believer. It is very definitely dependent on grace alone and in no sense sees the work of Christ as in any way deficient or superfluous. The crisis is quite simply a pastoral accommodation enabling the individual to discover and possess his or her possessions in Christ thus allowing for what might otherwise be a psychological impossibility. Focusing in, therefore, on *Christian Perfection*

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<sup>44</sup> Romans 14: 17.

<sup>45</sup> for example: 1 Corinthians 2: 14-3: 1-4; Philippians 3: 12-15; Hebrews 5: 12-14; 1 John 2: 12-14

<sup>46</sup> Peters sees Fletcher as stressing more than Wesley the ongoing nature of Christian Perfection. Peters, p. 75 f. Heitzenrater on the other hand sees Fletcher go further than Wesley in stressing the 'second blessing' nature of Christian Perfection. Heitzenrater, R. P., *Wesley and the People called Methodists*, [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995], p. 247

as 'entire sanctification' and seeing it in terms of a crisis of completion, as many have done, can only give a distorted view of what Wesley and Fletcher desired to portray. It is of no small significance to the present writer that at no point in Wesley's final summary of *Christian Perfection* in the Plain Account does he refer to 'it' as 'entire sanctification'.<sup>47</sup> As the six aspects illustrate, *Christian Perfection* was a much broader idea. Sanctification in the active sense was only one of a 'interlocking cluster of ideas' which went to make up the concept of *Christian Perfection*. Unfortunately, it was this one which became fixed in the minds of people with the result that everything else becomes obscured by endless discussion on definitions of 'sin' and 'perfection'. Certainly it can be argued that Wesley and Fletcher, in no small measure, contributed to this problem by persisting in qualifying the definitions. Yet this should not be simply interpreted as confirmation of the weakness of their case. Rather it should be seen as evidence of their continued concern to hold to a quality of Christian living which they believed to be available for all through grace and more in keeping with that which Jesus Christ described as 'abundant life'.<sup>48</sup> As Fletcher described it: '...nothing to do but to die to all that is of the sinful nature, and to pray for the power of an endless life'. Such a description, of course, can appear to be quite other worldly and totally unrelated to the late 20th Century. Yet as has been argued this was not the form of spirituality which Wesley and Fletcher intended to present. *Christian Perfection* encapsulated a spirituality which was aimed at enabling the believer to realise 'Christian authenticity within the form of his/her own culture'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 441 f.

<sup>48</sup> John 10: 10

<sup>49</sup> Introduction, p. 7

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